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OF ELDEN RING

ARMORED CORE VI
FIRES OF RUBICON

+10

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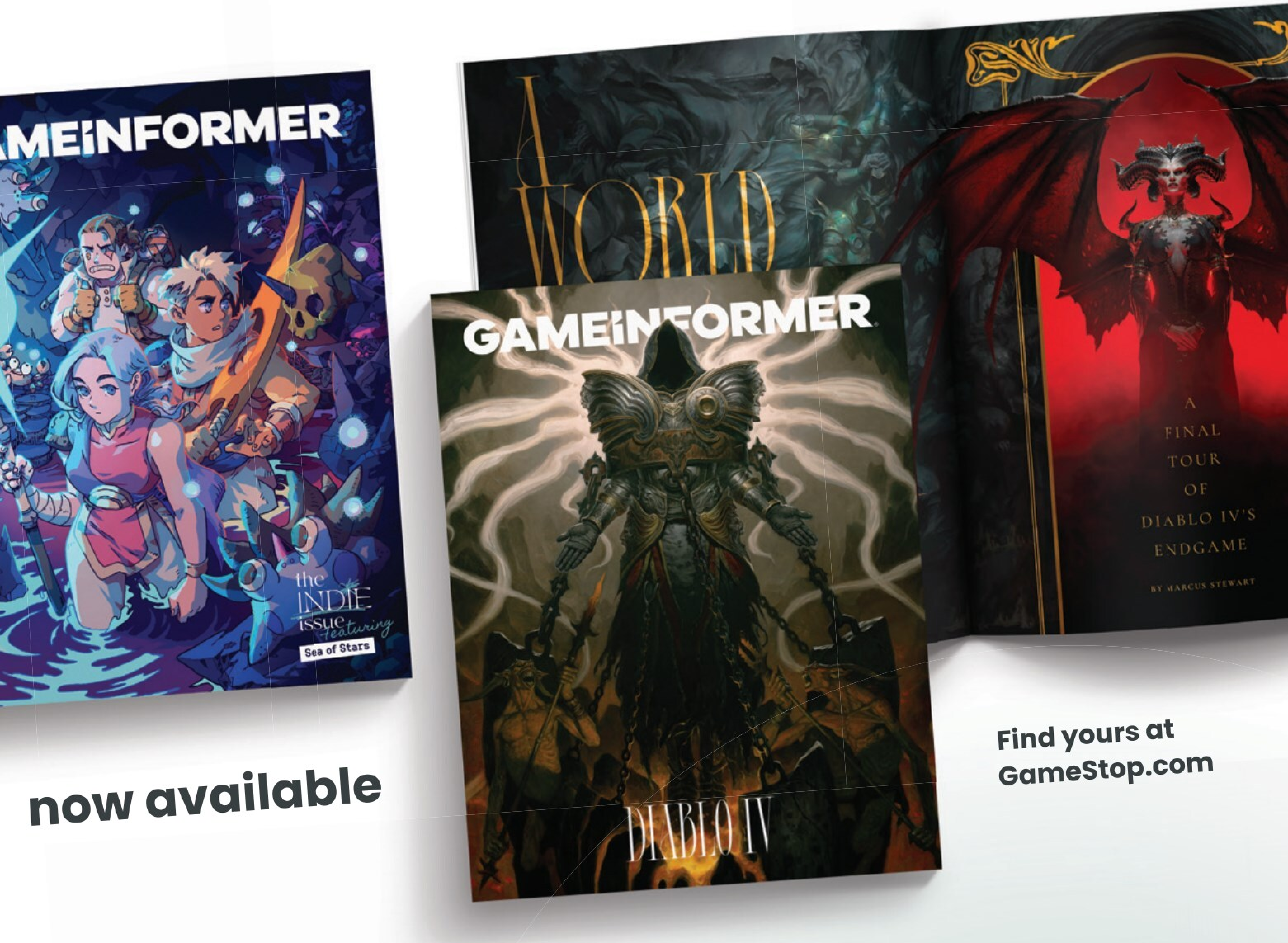
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EDITOR'S NOTE

'TIS THE SEASON

THE END-OF-YEAR HOLIDAY MONTHS have always been a fun period to be into games, but gamers have also recognized the early summer as a moment for excitement, thanks to the deluge of announcements, reveals, and demos that tend to appear.

That was largely thanks to E3 being a fixture of the gaming world each year, which offered publishers and developers a chance to roll out the red carpet and reveal the next big things each was ready to show off to the world.

The cancellation of this year's E3 event was a big deal, and the future of the expo seems uncertain. As thrilling as that experience was to the broader public, it was also a notable seismic event each year in the life of game industry professionals – a chance to meet up, reconnect, and formulate a personal state of gaming for anyone whose job was connected to the hobby. Love or hate the hype and stress around it, there was no doubting its impact on shaping perceptions and expectations for the coming year.

MATT MILLER
Editor-In-Chief

Even with the formal convention out of the mix, the inertia of that early summer enthusiasm remains unchanged. Game companies still have amazing projects to share with the world, and show or no show, that info was ready to burst out. It's made for an unusual shift in which many major platform holders and publishers charted their own course for press conferences, streams, and other standalone events where they could pull back the curtain. In other cases, games appeared at the Summer Game Fest show and its connected Play Days, or one of several other smaller gatherings.

The gaming industry still seemed intent on descending into Los Angeles for a shared gathering, but watching how each company charts new paths to being seen and discovered is fascinating.

As game makers reformulated summer announcement plans, it was clear that this would still be a season of exciting games, with plenty to learn about. With that in mind, we devoted a huge chunk of this issue toward sharing insight and previews into what's been shown.

Our cover story on Armored Core VI Fires of Rubicon reveals what's coming next from From Software, the studio that brought us 2022's phenomenal Elden Ring. Can the developer revive its older niche mech series and imbue some of the same magic it's brought to other recent games? We went to From Software's Tokyo studio to find out.

Beyond that, you'll find dozens of pages looking at other upcoming games that impressed us. If the early summer reveals are any indication, we have a very exciting year of gaming ahead.

Thanks for coming along as we explore what's next.

Play well. Be well.

↘

GAMEINFORMER
FROM THE CREATORS OF ELDEN RING
ARMORED CORE VI
FIRES OF RUBICON

Armored Core VI Fires of Rubicon

From Software has gained acclaim in recent years for its challenging and rewarding games, including the Dark Souls series, Bloodborne, Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice, and Elden Ring. Long before those franchises rose to prominence, the team helped evolve the mecha combat genre with Armored Core. After more than a decade since the last numbered entry, the developer is returning to the series to see if it can bring similar success to its established science fiction setting.

This month, we traveled to Tokyo, Japan, to visit From Software's headquarters and gain insight into the making of Armored Core VI Fires of Rubicon, the lessons the team has drawn from more recent projects, and get a look at the game in action.

On our cover, you can see the massive scale and detail apparent on one of the Armored Core mechas as it prepares for battle.

Read our full cover story on p. 24.

GAMEINFORMER

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Kyle Hilliard

Magazine Content Director

I am a responsible adult who is good at sleeping. Not to brag, but I usually go eight hours straight with no breaks. I've been doing it for years. But then Tears of the Kingdom entered my life and demolished my sleep schedule. I began neglecting sleep in a race against nobody to make sure I found every Shrine. Nintendo worked really hard on making those, and someone needs to experience them all. Why not me? In my admittedly drowsy waking life, I now hear the Shrine of Light Sensor bleeps everywhere I go.

Kristin Williams

Web/Graphic Designer & Programmer

I might have a hoarding problem, but only when it comes to video game items. I can't sell anything because I might need it later and then where will I be? The Horizon series might have my favorite loot system simply because it lets you know if each item is there for crafting or just to sell for some extra cash, freeing me from my collecting obligations. Tears of the Kingdom, on the other hand? You bet I have at least three of everything and I'm probably gathering a few more, just in case.

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After the phenomenal Elden Ring, From Software is already prepared to unleash its next experience on the world, and it marks a return to the franchise that helped build the studio. We visited From Software in Japan to learn about the game, see it in action, and find out what lessons from Dark Souls it can bring to the custom mech genre.

12 BUILDING TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

Longtime Zelda producer Eiji Aonuma and Breath of the Wild and Tears of the Kingdom director Hidemaro Fujibayashi spoke to us about how they created a sequel to one of the best games of all time.

14 IN A PILE OF FLESH

From announcement to release, Dead Island 2 was supposed to take less than a year. Instead, it took nine. We spoke with developers to find out why.

38 A VINYL VISION

Former members of teams behind the Lego video games have gathered to make a new game based on a different type of toy that has also partnered with countless intellectual properties.

78 GETTING INTO THE GAME

Netflix is making a concerted effort to get into the video game space by including mobile games as part of its subscription. We spoke with Netflix and the developers on the new platform to find out how it works.

CAN A SANDWICH CRAFTED WITH DELECTABLY ROASTED CUTS MAKE YOUR TASTE BUDS QUAKE WITH YEARNING?

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Replies

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

I have heard from the gaming media for a little while now a complaint about how video games are too long these days. And I completely ... agree! The majority of games I am referring to are single-player games since multiplayer-based gameplay loops are structured for constant replayability. I love longer single-player games, or more specifically, tailored games with good story and experiences with more hours of gameplay. But too many games try to be the all-in-one game, and a majority of them are bloating the game just to keep you playing longer to incentivize microtransactions or battle passes or DLC packages or subscription services or-or-or. Sony for a little while has been producing first-party games with amazing narratives and gameplay with a conclusion, and Microsoft has Game Pass, which has highlighted plenty of great indie games you wouldn't always see with great short experiences as well. I am happy there are games with a longer duration so long as they can maintain a great story, but often you see a sacrifice of a great story for some kind of replayability arc. **– Groffles via Discord**

↳ *For a long time, video game marketers found great success in telling you just how many hours you can pour into a game without seeing all the content. These days, games that send out huge numbers as part of a marketing campaign often see backlash; Dying Light 2 is a recent example that comes to mind. While we definitely want a lot of bang for our buck – any gamer will tell you this hobby ain't cheap – we also don't want games that overstay their welcome; we bet you can think of a couple of games right off the top of your head that would have been better had they ended several hours sooner than they did.*

With live updates and downloadable content releases as the norm today, developers can put out a game with ambitions to keep players engaged for years to come. You're correct that these plans often work best with multiplayer titles – games like Destiny, World of Warcraft, and Final Fantasy XIV still get regular updates all these years later – but in a world where Daily Active Users is nearly as much of a metric of success as traditional sales numbers, it's no surprise that single-player titles want to get in on the action, sometimes even to the detriment of the game's actual strengths. Nobody likes shoehorned longevity, mechanics, or microtransactions (look no further than our "Asking A Lot" reply for more on that), but there are thankfully several studios that understand the value of a concise adventure that has a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end.

THE NEXT ROUND BEGINS

I love that we're entering a new golden age of fighting games. With Street Fighter leading the pack again, I'm excited to see all the new blood in the fighting game community and getting to play all these new fighting games (Tekken 8, Mortal Kombat 1, Street Fighter 6, Project L, GranBlue, etc.). Plus, now that these companies are finally taking online netcode seriously, it's the best time to play a new fighting game online with people from across the world; it's amazing that we can do that now with fighting games. It's an awesome time and I hope more people try out fighting games if not for competing then at least for having fun! **– SnakeEater1964 via Discord**

↳ *This year is shaping up to be one of the best years in fighting games history. Street Fighter 6 proves the genre's flagship franchise still has plenty of fight left in it, and we were extremely positive coming out of our demos with Tekken 8 and Mortal Kombat 1. We've been waiting for developers to put a greater emphasis on both online play and single-player content, and it feels like we're finally getting what we asked for. Street Fighter 6's World Tour mode is a substantial and impressive chunk of single-player content, while we can always rely on the team at NetherRealm Studios to deliver excellent single-player stories. Those modes are the most likely to entice casual or new fighting game players to test the waters, and if they like it enough, they'll stick around and ultimately grow the fighting game community. Add in all the indie fighters, more niche franchises, and titles from past years that still have legs, and fighting game fans are eating extremely well in 2023.*

ASKING A LOT

Am I the only one who feels games are getting a little slimy with their monetization? Destiny was the first game to put me off, slipping into season passes, plus paid dungeons, plus an in-game cosmetic store. Overwatch's in-game shop prices being absurdly high with long season pass grinds. Now we have Diablo, which is being reviewed well, but layers an initial price tag with season passes and an in-game shop. Is this just the future of games? It feels like we're hitting a breaking point with how much monetization can be packed into a game before players start leaving. **– Jherb24 via Discord**

↳ *The business model of video games has shifted considerably over the past couple decades. Previously, if you bought a game, that was it, for better or for worse. That meant while it was a complete experience on day one with no nickel-and-diming, if there were any bugs that needed to be fixed, you needed to buy a new copy from the game's subsequent retail runs (if the developer even bothered). It also meant you probably needed to buy multiple editions if you wanted the most up-to-date experience (we're looking at you Street Fighter II). There were absolutely some heavy pros to that era, but we shouldn't neglect to focus at least a little on the cons as well.*

In the years since, publishers have fallen in and out of love with trends like season passes to essentially make players pre-order DLC, shoehorned-in multiplayer modes to improve the longevity of a game, and battle passes to push players to pour tens of hours into a game to unlock the content they paid for. Free-to-play titles are often the most egregious on this front, but as you point out, microtransactions have become commonplace in $70 titles as well. There's certainly a spectrum on how much we're willing to tolerate in our premium games, with cosmetics on one end of the spectrum and pay-to-win gear on the other end. It's no secret that game budgets have inflated to unprecedented numbers, but publishers should exercise extreme caution before pushing invasive microtransaction practices to compensate for it; we're certain many readers of this magazine have a game or series they were turned off by due to its reliance on microtransactions. The age-old adage of "vote with your wallet" remains true to this day.

Soundoff: Summer Game Fest Hype

We asked our readers and community to shout out their favorite announcements or reveals from this month's showcases and presentations. Here are some of the answers!

I loved the trailer for South of Midnight. Sure, there was no gameplay, but we saw an awesome art style and a Southern Gothic setting. If the note-perfect guitar playing is any indication of the level of attention to detail we can expect, then I am all in!
– thenthomwaslike via Discord

Final Fantasy VII Rebirth! That trailer was everything I could have asked for and my hype was through the roof! **– via Instagram**

Can't wait for Starfield and the many subsequent remasters. Seriously, this feels like what I hoped from No Man's Sky. **– Dr. Mono via Discord**

For me, it was The Crew: Motorfest. It looks like a mash-up of Forza Horizon and Need for Speed Heat. Plus, I love the Hawaiian locale! **– via Instagram**

Mortal Kombat 1 looks soooo good. Can't wait to see if it or Street Fighter 6 ends up being the stronger entry for the year. Either way, it's going to be a lot of fun.
– chalkfullof via Discord

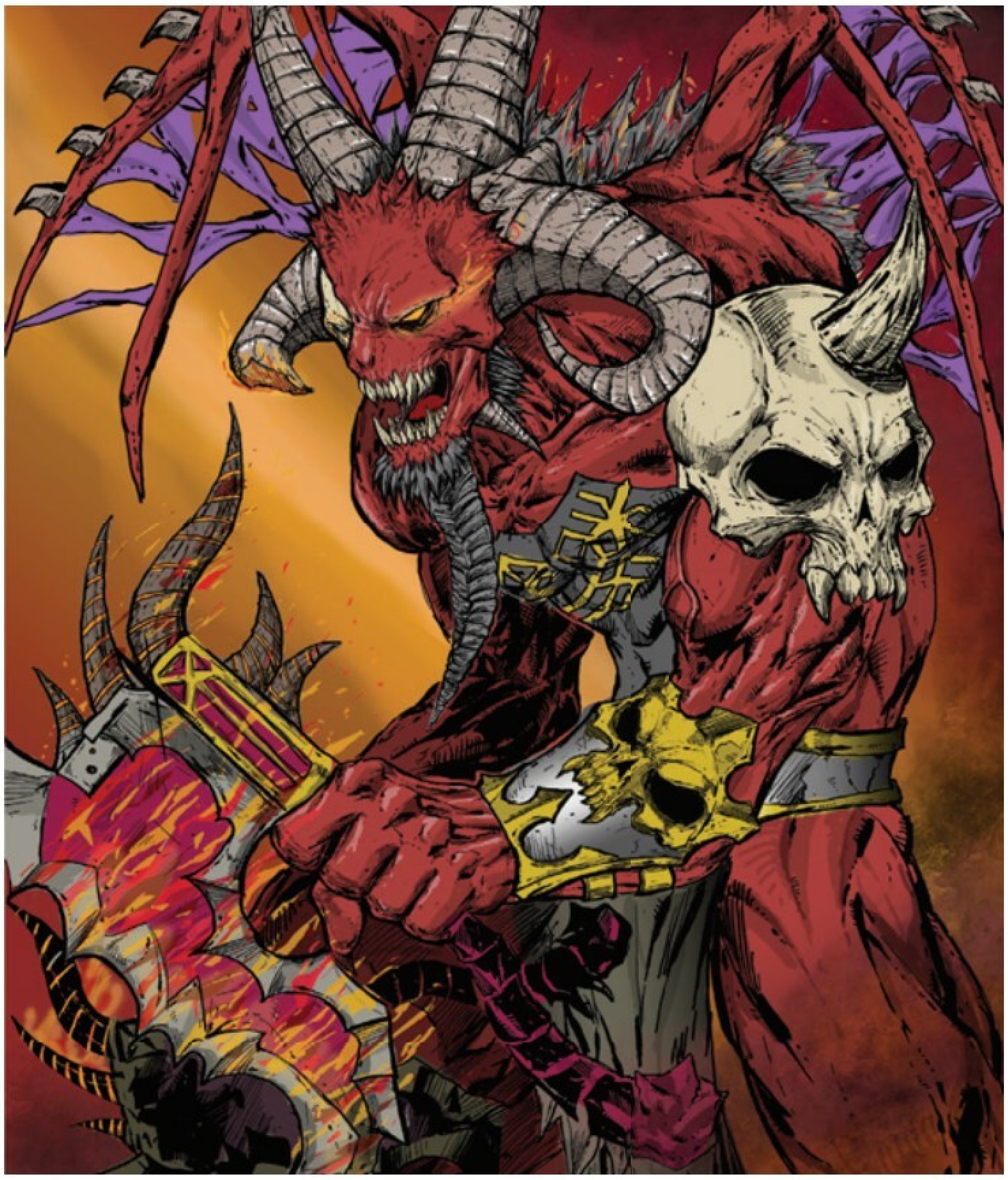
Star Wars Outlaws. So unexpected. There's been rumors, but not to the extent that gameplay footage would be ready to be shown. Incredible! **– via Instagram**

Fable. I've loved all the Fables and this one looks better than those. It's giving me Disenchanted vibes. **– via Instagram**

The Pulse

Each issue, we ask the community what they've been playing over the last month and have compiled power rankings of the current hottest games among our readers.

1. The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom NEW
2. Diablo IV NEW
3. Street Fighter 6 NEW
4. Star Wars Jedi: Survivor ▼ 3
5. Dead Space
6. Wolfenstein: Youngblood
7. Cyberpunk 2077
8. The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild ▲ 2
9. Resident Evil 4 ▼ 8
10. Overwatch 2



Reader art winner: Nevzat Mutlu

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GI SPY

Each month, we attend events and visit developers to get the latest information on the hottest games. Check out some of our latest photos from around the video game industry.

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1.

Alex, Brian, and Wesley spent nearly a week in Los Angeles, California, to attend Summer Game Fest 2023. You can read all about it on p. 10

2.

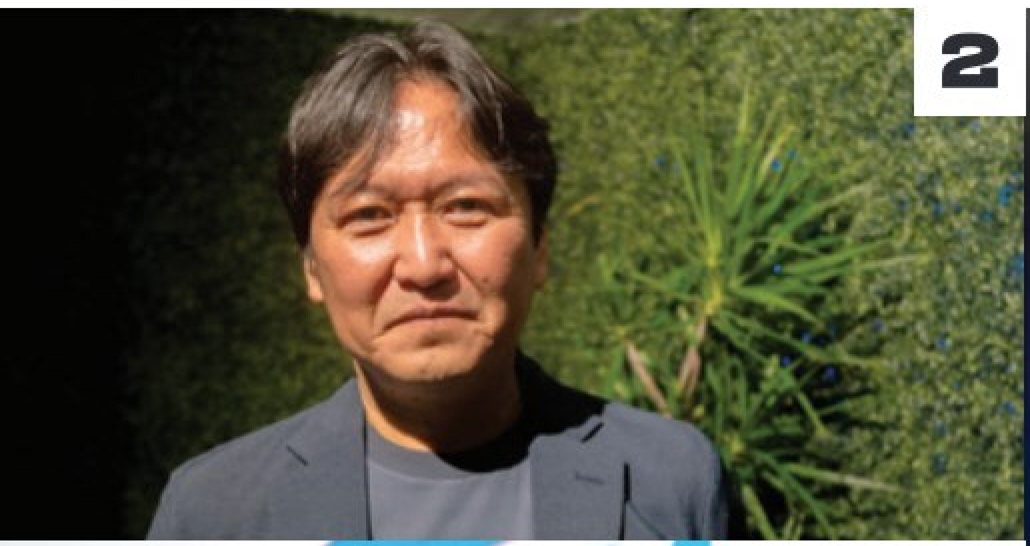
We sat down with Sonic Team's creative officer Takashi Iizuka to learn more about Sonic Superstars. Read our preview on p. 54

3.

We caught up with Mortal Kombat co-creator Ed Boon and got all the gory details about the upcoming Mortal Kombat 1. You can read our full preview on p. 50

4.

It turns out Ifrit is just as intimidating when you run into him at a party as when you run into him in battle



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FINAL FANTASY XVI

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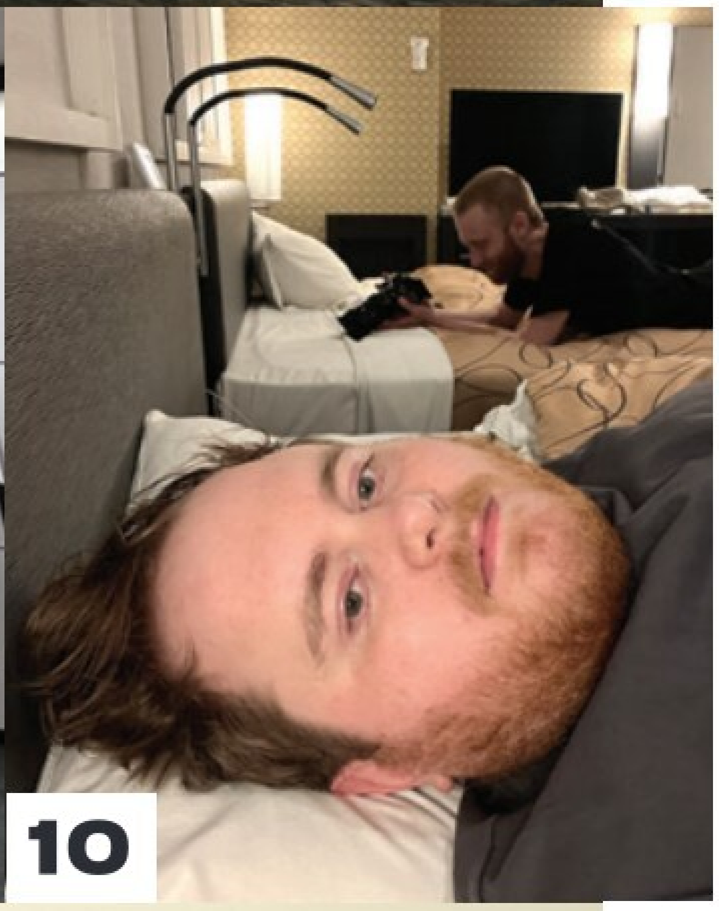

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11

5.

While at Summer Game Fest, Alex and Wesley took a night to do karaoke and share laughs with YouTuber Kevin Kenson, 505 Games' Luis Alamilla, Kotaku's Kenneth Shepard, and freelance journalists Shannon Liao and Cameron Hawkins

6.

Xbox invited us to a private panel moderated by Xbox's Tina Summerford featuring Xbox executives Phil Spencer, Sarah Bond, and Matt Booty, and Bethesda's Todd Howard

7.

Brian swung by Blizzard's headquarters in Irvine, California, to play through one of the new Overwatch 2 story missions and chat with game director Aaron Keller

8.

Final Fantasy XVI producer Naoki Yoshida addresses the crowd at a pre-launch celebration

9.

We traveled to Tokyo, Japan, for this month's cover story! Read all about Armored Core VI Fires of Rubicon on p. 24

10.

After doing some sightseeing outside of Tokyo, Blake and Alex got caught in a typhoon and were stranded in a hotel for an evening

11.

Blake simply couldn't visit Japan without getting a tour of the Bandai Namco Gundam factory in Shizuoka ■

The Takeover

With E3 on the bench, Geoff Keighley's Summer Game Fest steals the show **BY BRIAN SHEA**

IT'S BEEN A TIME-HONORED TRADITION SINCE THE '90S for games media to descend upon Los Angeles, California, to meet with the biggest names in video game development. For nearly 30 years, that was all done in the name of the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), which originally aimed to be the Consumer Electronics Show of the game industry. E3 attracted thousands of people to the massive Los Angeles Convention Center each year, making it one of the world's biggest gaming trade events.

E3 was considered by many to be the most important event on the game industry's annual calendar, often highlighted by flashy press conferences full of massive reveals, world's-first hands-on opportunities, and an absolute avalanche of gaming news. However, as we reached the late 2010s, E3's relevance was in question, with multiple major publishers leaving the show. Following the cancellation of E3 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the once-essential show has struggled to get back on its feet. In 2021, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) held E3 virtually to mixed results but opted not to return to that (or any) format in 2022.

In its place, Summer Game Fest slid into the role once held by E3. Summer Game Fest, founded and organized by The Game Awards' Geoff Keighley, started as a digital-only showcase in 2020, essentially serving as an extra presentation for publishers to make announcements. The virtual show returned in 2021 with even bigger reveals and a demo event in partnership with Xbox.

The game completely changed in 2022, as Keighley supplemented his virtual Summer Game Fest stream with an in-person event in Los Angeles, providing hands-on and interview access for upcoming games. Summer Game Fest 2022 was full of promising indies, but a few triple-A publishers offered first hands-on for games like Street Fighter 6 and Sonic Frontiers. The small, media and influencer-only event provided a much-needed overhaul of the bloated and chaotic formula from E3's most recent iterations. Still, the true test of Summer Game Fest's success would be how it evolved in future physical iterations.

Heading into 2023, it seemed as though Los Angeles would play host to dueling June events, with Summer Game Fest returning and expanding and the ESA recruiting Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) organizer ReedPop to provide a better experience for E3 2023. However, after months of major publishers announcing they were pulling out of the show, ReedPop and the ESA canceled E3 2023 due to lack of interest, casting serious doubt on the future of the iconic expo and clearing the runway for Summer Game Fest 2023 to dominate the month.

Keighley hosted an in-person presentation in Los Angeles, but also partnered with the likes of Xbox, Capcom, Ubisoft, and more to provide a full schedule of streamed announcements. These showcases provided trailers for games like Final Fantasy VII Rebirth, Starfield, Marvel's Spider-Man 2, Star Wars Outlaws, and plenty more. Actor Nicolas Cage even came on stage to discuss his new appearance in Dead by Daylight. This evolution shows that Summer Game Fest has slid comfortably into the role E3 once occupied.

Returning for the second year, the in-person side of Summer Game Fest demonstrated a clear understanding of how to expand effectively. Last year, what was primarily contained in one room in an event space in the Fashion District of downtown Los Angeles grew to become an entire campus utilizing multiple buildings for various publishers and game makers. That original room still held the same pod-based demo stations, this time for games like Sonic Superstars, Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty, and a cornucopia of promising indies, but an extra room of pods added space for Crash Team Rumble, Remnant II, and even a Magic: The Gathering area.

The rest of the spacious campus included private event areas for publishers like Square Enix, Amazon, Bandai Namco, and Niantic. At the same time, behind-closed-doors demos offered looks at games like Alan Wake 2, Mortal Kombat 1, and Immortals of Aveum. It was important for members of the media to get their hands on various triple-A titles and speak with the folks working on them, but having them share the space with so many promising indie titles made it an event ripe for discovery. Each attending *Game Informer* editor left Summer Game Fest 2023 with a new most-anticipated indie title.

Perhaps the biggest advantage Summer Game Fest has over E3 is its scale. While it's still a well-attended event full of top developers, content creators, and media outlets, it has the heart of a smaller expo. Unlike E3, it doesn't take 30 minutes to get from one conference hall to the next, and the number of games, while still too plentiful to play all of them, feels less overwhelming. It's just unfortunate that it, like E3 before it, takes place somewhere prohibitively expensive, like Los Angeles. It's a problem many industry events have yet to solve and one that likely prevents up-and-coming developers from showcasing their games.

Despite that negative, Summer Game Fest's evolution in its fourth year shows the industry still benefits from the continuation of in-person shows. The increasing number of streamed presentations gives fans worldwide an exciting glimpse into what's next, much like Keighley's The Game Awards have for years now. But by keeping the in-person event more low-key and manageable, Summer Game Fest provides an optimized and well-run way for developers to showcase their games to influencers, content creators, streamers, and members of the media from around the world. ■

For more on the biggest games of Summer Game Fest 2023, head to our previews section on p. 42

AFTERWORDS

Building Tears of the Kingdom

We spoke with producer Eiji Aonuma and director Hidemaro Fujibayashi to learn about making the biggest game of 2023

BY BRIAN SHEA

The launch of The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild proved massively successful for Nintendo. Not only did the game effectively launch its new system, the Nintendo Switch, it served as a thesis statement for Nintendo's approach to huge, explorable open worlds and the freedom to experiment with the various systems on offer. Upon launch, Breath of the Wild earned critical acclaim and fan adoration en route to winning several Game of the Year awards and inspiring future games, like *Game Informer*'s 2022 Game of the Year, Elden Ring. Needless to say, Nintendo had a lot to live up to with its sequel.

Announced at E3 2019 simply as "the sequel to The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild," Tears of the Kingdom's development began in earnest near the tail end of its predecessor's production. Breath of the Wild director Hidemaro Fujibayashi toyed with some elements in the environment of Breath of the Wild, creating a cylinder out of stone slates that already existed in the world. From there, he dropped Link's Remote Bomb in, followed by a ball to create a makeshift cannon. Fujibayashi also combined some infinitely-spinning cogwheels and those same stone slates to create a car. He then added a cannon, ultimately creating a tank.

These trial-and-error sessions within Breath of the Wild's development tools sparked an idea for Fujibayashi. He recorded a video of his experiments to present to series producer Eiji Aonuma as a pitch for a follow-up to Breath of the Wild. "This movie was a presentation to show that without really adding anything, all we would need was Link to have the ability to connect things and stick things together, and an entirely new experience could be had," Fujibayashi says.

Aonuma was already ruminating on the notion that there was so much potential still in the world they'd built for Breath of the Wild, so when Fujibayashi brought him the video, he was enthusiastic about pursuing it as a full-on sequel with Fujibayashi once again directing. Aonuma reflected on lessons from creating other direct sequels in the Zelda franchise, like Majora's Mask and A Link Between Worlds, but ultimately decided that outside of making sure the development team had more time than it did with some other games in the franchise, there weren't a lot of direct learnings to apply to the creation of Tears of the Kingdom.

"When thinking about the development of this game as a sequel, the scope and direction that the development needed to take for this game was completely different than those previous examples," Aonuma says. "We were using the world that we had created in Breath of the Wild to build a sequel from scratch with this game, instead of, with previous examples that I had mentioned, reformatting or restructuring the games from their previous iterations and reconfiguring them to make something new."

While the initial pitch from Fujibayashi was that Nintendo could deliver a new experience with the simple addition of the mechanic that would eventually be known as Ultrahand, the development team didn't stop there. Fuse, which allowed for attaching objects to weapons and shields, bolstered an already intricate weapons economy, while Recall let players rewind time on a given object. Ascend was the most difficult power to implement due to its design and technical implications. This power, which allows for Link to swim through any nearby ceiling and emerge on the top, started as a development tool, but it quickly expanded to a player-facing ability.

Tears of the Kingdom also accumulated myriad new features, including additional abilities for Link, distinct dungeons, and perhaps most noteworthy, a massive expansion to Hyrule in the form of the Sky Islands, as well as The Depths, a sprawling underground area nearly as large as the surface.

While Tears of the Kingdom doesn't present an entirely new Hyrule, the modifications posed new challenges for the development team. From the verticality needed to complement Link's speedy skydiving, to distancing the Sky Islands to accommodate player-created vehicles, the team had a number of difficult hurdles to overcome.

All this comes together to deliver the most open experience in the series, giving players so much flexibility they often take shortcuts or solve problems in ways the developers never planned. "Cheating is fun!" Aonuma says with a laugh. "When thinking of games in the past that we've worked on, where there was a puzzle to solve and only one answer, that's kind of the old way of developing games. Now, I'm happy that we've arrived at this method where we're giving people lots of options, and there are many answers to a single problem, and all of them can potentially be correct."

The adventure is tied together by an all-new story centered around the resurrection of one of the most popular characters in the series: Ganondorf. While Breath of the Wild featured a grotesque killing machine known as Calamity Ganon, Tears of the Kingdom gave players a fleshed-out character with a powerful, strategic personality, and voice.

"With Breath of the Wild, we knew what we wanted to make, and we knew what kind of story we wanted to tell, and within that kind of setting that we set for ourselves, the idea of the Demon King Ganondorf wasn't the right fit. That's why we created what was Calamity Ganon," Fujibayashi says. "With Tears of the Kingdom, there's this new relationship between Ganondorf and Zelda, and then Link, the protagonist that kind of falls in between that. I think we were able to come up with a new expression of this relationship and the story and the scenario of this game and were able to really create a new world and new story even though the system is very similar to the previous game."

Now, with Tears of the Kingdom proving its success in both critical reviews and community response, it's clear that this new format has been successful for Nintendo. Much in the way that Ocarina of Time paved the path for future 3D Zelda games in 1998, Breath of the Wild and Tears of the Kingdom have laid the foundation for the future of the Zelda series.

"The series continued to evolve after Ocarina of Time, but I think it's also fair to say now we've arrived at Breath of the Wild and the new type of more open play and freedom that it affords," Aonuma says. "I think it's correct to say that it has created a new kind of format for the series to proceed from."

Of course, regardless of the innovations brought to the series, both Aonuma and Fujibayashi understand the importance of making sure future games still possess the Zelda DNA that has made the franchise so important and beloved for more than three decades.

"Even if a game like Breath of the Wild has really big changes in it, as long as the fans and the players are able to feel that this is a Zelda game at its core when they play the game, that is something that is really important for us when meeting fans' expectations," Aonuma says. ■

RECALLING IDEAS

The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom introduces players to a ton of new areas to explore with a fresh suite of abilities. While many of the added features and content stem from ideas cut from its 2017 predecessor, Breath of the Wild, few of the ideas developed for Tears of the Kingdom were cut out of the final game.

The powers – Ultrahand, Fuse, Recall, and Ascend – were all included very early in development. "In the initial phases, we threw out a bunch of ideas and then kind of whittled it down to these four ideas," director Hidemaro Fujibayashi says. "There were initially a lot of ideas that came up, but that was in a very early stage before it was actually fleshed out."

Though Link's powers were settled early on, another collection was less permanent. "We had a lot of different versions of Zonai Devices that we came up with ideas for, but at some point, we realized we don't want to give the player too many of these and cause decision paralysis or trouble for them," producer Eiji Aonuma says. "So, we did eventually kind of pare that list down, and there were a few Zonai Device ideas that we didn't use."

IN A PILE OF FLESH

Inside Yager Development's attempt to make Dead Island 2

BY BLAKE HESTER

I'M WITH
STUPID

From announcement to release, Dead Island 2 was supposed to take less than a year. Instead, it took nine.

What briefly began in the early 2010s at Techland, the developer behind the first game, then moved to Yager Development, then Sumo Digital, and then finally, Deep Silver's Dambuster Studio, was finally released in 2023.

Understanding what went wrong requires many factors – how publisher Deep Silver makes deals, how Unreal Engine 4 works (or didn't, at the time), and how unprepared the team at Yager was for the project it had taken on. To make sense of it all, we spoke to numerous people from the development and publishing side to find out exactly what Dead Island 2 was in its first iteration at Yager and what went wrong along the way. Everyone we spoke to did so under the condition of anonymity to share what they know, not wishing to publicly break non-disclosure agreements.

THE WORLD'S SMALLEST MMO

After the success of the first Dead Island, people on the development and publishing side say plans for a sequel were immediate. However, when developer Techland and Deep Silver didn't agree on a direction for the game, Deep Silver passed and looked for other options.

Around 2012, it sent out a request for proposals, inviting developers to pitch their ideas for Dead Island 2. Spec-Ops: The Line developer Yager came in at the lowest bid, so it got the job.

Neither Yager nor Deep Silver responded to our request for comment.

Yager made its greenlight demos in Unreal Engine 3, showcasing a small vertical slice of potential gameplay. Former developers say its original pitch had much in common with the original Dead Island: Four-player co-op, crafting, looting, and so on. "The way Dead Island 1 would've been described just in a different setting with potentially much, much higher production values," a former higher-up from Yager says.

Numerous people estimate the development team's size at about 85 to 100 people. Yager set up the sub-studio Yager Productions GmbH to handle development. For the actual game, it licensed Epic Games' then-unreleased Unreal Engine 4 (UE4), being one of the first studios to do so. At the time, Timo Ullmann, Yager's then-managing director, said, "Unreal Engine 4 is, hands down, the best toolset for creating next-generation, triple-A games."

Yager's Dead Island 2 took place in California and featured multiple open-world maps of key locations around the state. The broad strokes of the story were that the zombie outbreak from the first game lands in California, so the country walled off the state. One of the main features people remember was a Jack Black-like mission-giver, Max, that appears briefly in the game's reveal trailer, and his cat. According to one developer we talked to – and backed up by reporting from the time – Dead Island 2 was supposedly the first ever game with a motion-captured cat. Max and his cat would later end up in the spin-off side-scroller Dead Island: Retro Revenge.

People from both Deep Silver and Yager say players would travel across California to separate open-world levels such as a smaller-scale San Francisco, and then larger levels based on Los Angeles and the Redwood National Forest.

San Francisco, serving as the game's tutorial level, was about the size of a "medium-size Battlefield map," one person tells *Game Informer*. And while Los Angeles and the Redwoods would've been bigger maps, no one says the open worlds would've been massive.

"Part of that came from the intention of, for instance, having houses that will be fully accessible," a higher-up from Yager says. "That would've gotten away from some other games where you are either all outside [or] all inside, and that [is how] you get your world size."

However, not too far into the process, multiple people say there was a shift toward making an eight-player, always-online, seamless multiplayer game. While many core tenets stayed in place, this was a radical shift from the game Yager pitched. And multiple people say it was done without a new round of pre-production.

The new vision, as people called it, was "the world's smallest MMO." It'd become one of the game's biggest problems – but certainly not the only one.

There was also UE4.

IT LOOKED GOOD

Dead Island 2 was announced at E3 2014 with a bright and sunny trailer featuring a man happily running along the Santa Monica boardwalk as a zombie outbreak unfolds behind him. It was big news, the surprise sequel to a smash hit. The press was shown a behind-closed-doors, hands-off demo, including looks at the "unpolished" San Francisco level, combat, and weapon combinations.

Initially, it had a spring 2015 release date. Despite the positive buzz from events, behind the scenes, that date was contentious.

"There were people who were hopelessly optimistic about it and just going, 'Yeah, s---, we'll just make it happen,'" one person says. "The other half – I counted myself in that camp – we were just saying, 'Yep, sure. Let them [get] the marketing beat on it, get some pre-orders in; we're going to be a year out from there. Easily.'"

Because Dead Island 2 was in trouble.

UE4 essentially doomed the project, multiple people from Deep Silver and Yager say. The problem was Dead Island 2 was an open-world game, and at least at the time, UE4 was not an open-world engine. While the game could run on PCs, it severely struggled on consoles.

Multiple people describe scenarios where UE4 wouldn't prioritize which textures to load, seemingly pulling them at random. For example, they couldn't run around freely in the game's world because something like a trash can directly in front of the player was blocking their path but hadn't loaded in yet. This problem extended all the way up to large assets in the game, like buildings, which wouldn't load into sight once the player was close to them.

Another issue was the aforementioned depth of the game's world – even on the smaller level.

"What we also worked a lot on was the San Francisco pier level – this was the tutorial thing – and there, you could enter every single building on the pier," one former developer says. "The engine already struggled there, if I recall correctly."

Multiple people say Epic tried to work with Yager to remedy the issues, but setbacks caused by UE4 took a toll on the development timeline. Even though Epic was offering support, as one higher-up from Yager says, "they never got anywhere close to being able to say, 'Yes, this is an open world-feasible engine.'"

Epic Games declined to comment for this story.

Yager began missing milestones, no longer delivering on the game it was developing. Exacerbating its engine problems, it was having its own issues, including a new management structure, needing more people on the project, and a lack of online experience.

WE WERE NOT READY

In an ideal scenario, Dead Island 2 would've worked like so:

You load into a server with seven other people – some might be friends, others random players. Around you is a world in motion: Zombies walk around, missions are in progress, and you're free to explore, tackle objectives, or whatever you choose. Occasionally, a small event or quest might appear on the map. Or you can ignore them. It's up to you. When you're ready, you and your friends can tackle the campaign, triggering larger missions.

This MMO slant on the action game genre was a fairly novel concept at the time. Not too long afterward, Bungie's 2014 game Destiny did something similar for first-person shooters – but even then, struggled with the idea. However, there were some critical differences between that game and Yager's Dead Island 2.

"I mean, Destiny was developed by maybe 600 people," one developer says (in September 2014, Bungie revealed its headcount was 500 people, though the point still stands). "We were a team of 90. Maybe 100. And we were not ready for that."

"We didn't have [the] experience nor the technology to do that back then," they add. "There was one day in which we told everyone, 'Hey, from now on, we need everyone to test this game on a server-client base. We need you to launch the game. Every time you test it, please test it as a client, not as a standalone game. You connect to the game, and you will see how badly this game works.' And yeah, that was the day in which, I think, 95 percent of the company realized that the game was working really horribly."

Yager was nearing the point of no return with Dead Island 2. And perhaps without the leadership to course correct.

Following the release of Spec Ops, Yager adopted a flatter work structure. This was around when Valve's "Handbook For New Employees" leaked online, looking behind the curtain at the company's lax approach to corporate hierarchy. Yager pushed for a similar culture, and while at least two people we talked to liked the flat structure, in the eyes of others, it went too far.

"It was flat to the point that it became ridiculous," one person says. "As in, like, anybody could suggest anything. There was no coaching for it; there were no coaches within the team as part of that enabling people or anything. It was just like, 'Try it out.' The company owners themselves, the executive management, they took themselves out of that. They just said, like, 'Hey, you guys do this and make it work.'"

In an attempt to salvage the project under Yager, Deep Silver sent engine architects from Volition, developer of the Saints Row and Red Faction series, also owned by Koch Media, to look at the issues with the open world and streaming. The consensus they came to wasn't good.

"They looked at it, and they're like, 'Yeah, you need to build this s--- from scratch,'" one developer recalls, laughing. "If that was true, we're like, 'Oh f---.' It was a bit of a moment. I think the penny dropped with that, right?"

Employees from the consulting company Toadman were also brought on board to help. Both parties agreed the project was too ambitious, the budget too low, and there weren't enough people working on the game. Dead Island 2 needed a complete restructuring.

And so Yager went back to the drawing board.

To solve one of the biggest problems, it planned to divide the open worlds into smaller chunks, multiple people say. For example, a former developer recalls Los Angeles would have been four maps instead of one.

"That was basically the big part of the solution to the problem," they say. "And then, going between the different areas, you just got a loading screen."

Another solution was to keep the game's MMO elements only in small instances. And so, while it would still have eight players, the smaller maps would've acted more like hub areas.

"There you can jump into almost the real game, which would be an instanced little linear section that you play cooperatively and takes maybe a couple hours to play through, so it's a relatively large chunk," a former developer says. "And then we can reuse a lot of maps and have different things going on in them based on if you're playing it in this MMO mode or if you're playing it in the narrative mode."

But despite its best efforts, the axe eventually came for Yager. In July 2015, Deep Silver announced it'd pulled the studio off Dead Island 2.

"With Dead Island 2, Deep Silver has always been dedicated to delivering the sequel that Dead Island fans deserve," Deep Silver said at the time. "After careful consideration, today we announce the decision to part ways with development partner Yager."

One developer we spoke to theorizes that the solutions Yager explored could have led it to finally releasing Dead Island 2. They say that after that redesign, it could've shipped something in "two years."

THE FUNNIEST THING

Following the cancellation of Dead Island 2, Yager Productions filed for insolvency.

"As a single-purpose company, Yager Productions GmbH was assigned to the development of the Deep Silver title Dead Island 2," Ullmann said in a statement (via *Gamesindustry.biz*). "The insolvency filing is a direct result from the early termination of the project and helps protecting [sic] our staff. In the course of the proceedings, we gain time to sort out the best options for reorganizing this entity."

In March 2016, Deep Silver revealed to MCV that the development of Dead Island 2 had been handed to Sumo Digital, the developer of the Sonic & All-Stars Racing series, Little Big Planet 3, and the then-in-development Crackdown 3. According to Deep Silver employees we talked to – who were not involved in the decision-making processes – the move was a shock.

"Collectively, everyone in the [...] office googled 'What the f--- is Sumo Games,' realized that they had only done kart racing games, and nothing that was rated over 'E' for 'Everybody,'" one person says. "And this was an M-rated open-world game."

During this piece's reporting process, we couldn't speak with enough people from Sumo Digital to publish anything conclusive about its time with Dead Island 2. However, by 2019, Sumo was off the project, too. Dambuster Studio replaced it, coincidentally set up in 2014 by Deep Silver to take over the development of Homefront: The Revolution from Crytek UK.

Dambuster released Dead Island 2 on April 21, 2023, more than a decade after work first began at Yager. While there are certainly similarities between the versions, Dambuster claims it started mostly from scratch when it inherited the project. Though notably, the released version of the game is running on UE4.

But even if Dead Island 2 eventually had a happy ending, it's hard to untangle it from its rocky road to release. We could only tell part of the story; two other studios had hands on the project. And at least according to one person we talked to before the game's eventual re-reveal, Dead Island 2 stands out as a particularly notable project – even if it's for all the wrong reasons.

"You know, it did strike me as, 'This is one of the oddest projects I've ever worked on,'" they say. "The funniest thing is, I keep running into people who have a connection to Dead Island. Even at my job now, I have met people that have worked on Dead Island in some form or fashion, and everybody keeps telling the same stories of how unimaginably f---ed up it is." ■

For more information on Yager's version of Dead Island 2, visit GameInformer.com to read a longer version of this story

QUESTIONS REMAIN FOR PROJECT Q

Sony's latest handheld is not a PSP successor, but it will let you play PlayStation 5 games in your hands **BY KYLE HILLARD**

Sony's 2023 PlayStation Showcase was full of exciting games like Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater (page 52), Spider-Man II (page 46), Alan Wake II (page 58), and plenty more, but nestled among the bombastic game trailers and announcements was a surprising hardware reveal.

The presentation was short, but Jim Ryan, president & CEO of Sony Interactive Entertainment, paused Sony's summer showcase to share a few details on what it has internally been calling Project Q. Project Q refers to two pieces of new Sony hardware. One is a handheld dedicated streaming device enabling you to stream using remote play over Wifi. The device features an 8-inch HD screen (pointedly not OLED) flanked by two halves of a PlayStation 5 controller. Ryan says it will include all of the buttons and features of the Dual Sense wireless controller. The PlayStation 5 controller touchpad is noticeably absent, which implies those functions are relegated to touching the screen, but Sony has not confirmed that functionality.

As far as Sony has shared, the device will only allow you to stream games over WiFi installed on your PlayStation 5, and VR games will, understandably, not be compatible.

The other part of Project Q is Sony's first-ever PlayStation earbuds. Like Apple's popular AirPods earbuds, the PlayStation earbuds will include a case that appears to charge the headphones when not in use. Ryan says the PlayStation earbuds, which do not have an official name yet, will bring "next-generation audio immersion to PS5 and PC" with lossless audio and low latency. The earbuds will also connect to smartphones via Bluetooth.

PlayStation 5's current first-party, over-the-ear headphones are easy to use and sound great, which inspires confidence that its earbuds will be of comparable quality. ■

NOT THE NEXT VITA

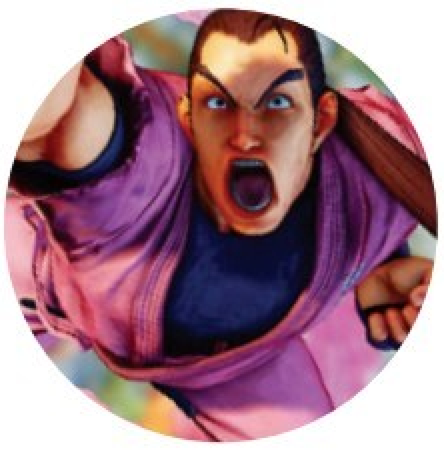
For those hoping Sony would pursue a new handheld inspired by the popularity of Nintendo Switch and Steam Deck, Project Q's reveal is a bit disappointing. At this early stage, the handheld's functions do not appear to extend beyond the kind of PlayStation streaming your smartphone is already fully capable of. Having a proper, if awkward, PlayStation 5 controller while streaming a game could make a big difference, but we definitely want to know more before getting too excited.

TOP FIVE

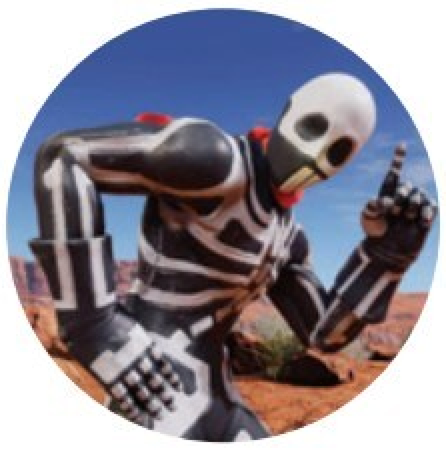
THE WEIRD WARRIORS

The top 5 goofiest Street Fighter characters

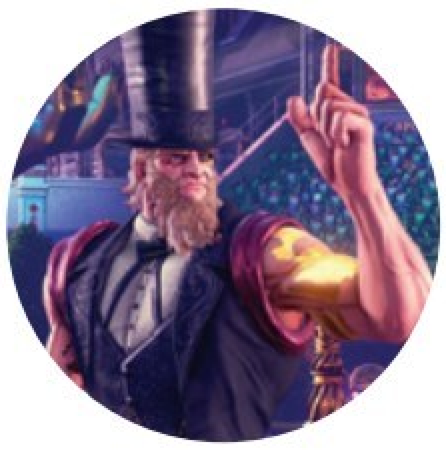
BY MARCUS STEWART



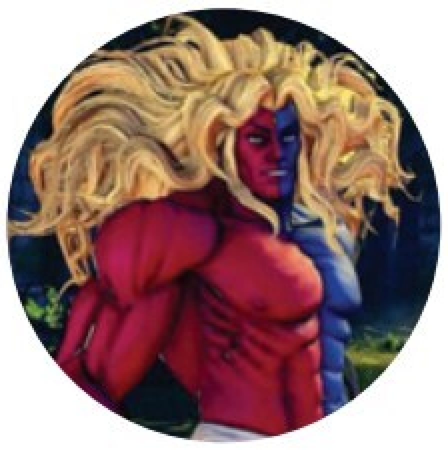
1 **Dan** loses a lot, but he'll always be the champion of the goofballs. From his pink gi to his over-inflated ego and hilariously ineffectual techniques, he's essentially the Wario to Ryu's Mario and we'll always chuckle at his silly antics.



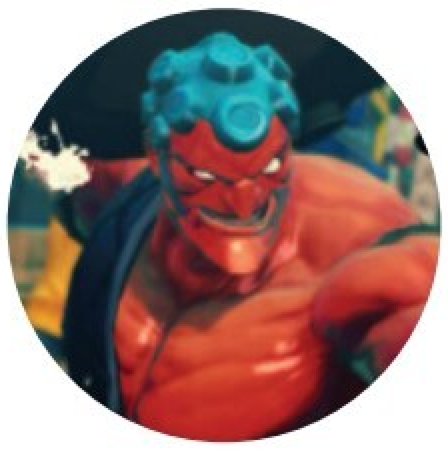
2 In this guy's case, "goofy" is synonymous with "awesome." The most memorable face of the overlooked Street Fighter EX series, **Skullomania** is a meek businessman turned wacky skeleton-themed vigilante, and we wish he'd fight crime in the main series.



3 Abraham Lincoln has gone Super Saiyan! No, that's just **G**, Street Fighter V's self-proclaimed "President of Earth." We're not sure who voted for him, but his over-the-top attitude, flashy gold-plated offense, and encouragement to bare arms has our support.



4 If Marvel's Adam Warlock painted himself to support his college football team, you'd get **Gill**. The first of several strange post-M. Bison bad guys, this bizarre cult leader leads the Illuminati but has yet to order his underlings to fetch his pants.



5 Despite **Hakan**'s tomato-red skin, Lego-like turquoise hair, and pupil-less eyes, we're led to believe he's human and not a greasy demon. But he runs a successful oil empire, has a beautiful wife, and a gaggle of kids, so this goof's winning life. ■

The abstract choice

GEAR

THE RIGHT GAME FOR YOUR GROUP

Great game nights start with the right selection **BY MATT MILLER**

① QAWALE

Borrowing liberally from the ancient traditions of the Mancala game, Qawale is a profoundly strategic two-player dueling game exhibiting tremendous flexibility yet is incredibly simple to pick up and play for the first time. Add your colored stone to a grid among the existing stones already present, then move the pile, dropping a piece in each space you pass. Four stones in a row wins. It's elegant, fast-playing, and thoroughly engaging.

$38 | *hachetteboardgames.com*

THE LORD OF THE RINGS ROLEPLAYING
A new twist
for role-players
2

❷ THE LORD OF THE RINGS ROLEPLAYING 5E

Fans of Tolkien's vast and celebrated mythology are sure to enjoy this latest take on storytelling and adventure in Middle-earth. The same team that brought us the recent and equally stellar "The One Ring" RPG crafted this adaptation, maintaining much of what's great about that system while making it much more accessible and familiar to D&D faithful. The art is gorgeous, and the setting details do justice to the source material. Sessions capture what is special about this fantasy; you control grounded, well-meaning heroes surviving desperate straits in a world of wonder, beauty, and darkness.

$47 | *freeleaguepublishing.com*

❸ AGRICOLA 15

Built to mark the 15th anniversary of this landmark and award-winning game, this massive collection gathers the core revised version of the game and much of the expanded content that has been released since. Newcomers can expect to discover a simple premise with incredible depth that emerges over time. Each player controls a farmer who must plow, gather, and expand to take care of a growing family. It's a foundational game in the modern board gamer's collection, and this is a great way to experience it.

$140 | *shop.asmodee.com*

❹ MARVEL: AGE OF HEROES

Take control of the X-Men in this innovative mix of worker placement, resource management, and superhero adventuring. Each player controls a duo of familiar characters (like Wolverine and Jubilee), managing their time powering up at The Institute before heading out on missions to take down supervillains like Magneto and Apocalypse. Distinct scenarios change up the deck for excellent replayability.

$75 | *wizkids.com*

AGRICOLA
3
Tried & tested

❺ ISS VANGUARD

Awaken Realms' massive cooperative space adventure has to be experienced to grasp its depth and excitement. Players crew different stations onboard humanity's first deep space mission, charting a lengthy story-focused campaign filled with mystery and danger. Time is split between managing the ship and discovering new places to explore. Fans of the Mass Effect video games will find much to love, but only experienced tabletop players should plan on undertaking the journey.

$159 | *shop.asmodee.com*

For the
family
KABUTO SUMO
甲虫相撲
6

❻ KABUTO SUMO

Giant insects as sumo wrestlers. If that concept makes you smile, this simple and kid-friendly release could be an excellent fit for your next family gaming get-together. Gameplay is a mix of strategy with a touch of dexterity gameplay since you control a specific insect who is trying to push your opponents off a raised disc board. Quick-playing in about 15 minutes, the charming insect art (each warrior has signature moves) and easy-to-understand mechanics make this one a six-legged winner.

$39 | *letsallplay.com*

NANCY WHEELER
MIKE WHEELER
DUSTIN HENDERSON
LUCAS SINCLAIR
7

❼ STRANGER THINGS UPSIDE DOWN

If you're eagerly awaiting the final TV chapter about the young heroes of Hawkins (and who isn't?), you should be delighted that this board game adaptation of the first two seasons turned out so well. Players work together to find allies, fight off the Demogorgon, and accomplish a core task (rescue Will!) while managing the growing threat in the town and its dark upside-down counterpart. You're balancing competing needs in a race against time, and the sense of looming threat perfectly captures what works in the retro show. ■

$50 | *cmon.com*

SET AFLAME BY

BY BLAKE HESTER
& ALEX VAN AKEN

STRY

FROM SOFTWARE TAKES TWO STEPS FORWARD AND ONE STEP BACK WITH ARMORED CORE VI FIRES OF RUBICON

Underwhelming.

That's the easiest word to describe From Software's office. Tucked in a nondescript building in Tokyo, Japan's Shibuya ward, the company takes up at least nine floors of a 13-story building. Inside, we're only allowed to see a small lobby and two conference rooms – one for our interview and another for a demo. Each is stale, white, and plain, with only a few framed pictures of Elden Ring review quotes to mark that, indeed, From Software is here.

On the one hand, this tracks for most Japanese game development studios. Compared to their Western counterparts – which now favor more open-air, comfortable designs – Japanese studios still lean towards the traditional cubicle farm. Nevertheless, given its pedigree, you catch yourself expecting more when you walk inside From – some kind of pageantry. After all, it is one of the most celebrated game studios in the world. Making some of the best games in the world. Not that you'd ever know from the outside – or even inside.

It's exciting to be here; a lot of history has happened within these walls. Given its importance, it's also a bit of a letdown.

We're here to be the first people in the world to see Armored Core VI Fires of Rubicon. It's the next in line after a near-unprecedented run of successful games, starting with the lauded Souls series, then moving on to 2015's Bloodborne and 2019's Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice, before reaching a critical and commercial apex with 2022's massively successful Elden Ring.

Armored Core VI is both a return to roots for From and a new frontier. It's the first Armored Core game in over a decade, a series that spans nearly the company's entire history. If you've become a fan of From over the last ten years, it looks unlike anything you might expect the studio to do now that it's famous for slow, methodical, and brutally difficult RPGs. It's fast, hectic, and flashy. It looks like the games From was making before it captured lightning in a bottle with its Souls formula.

And yet, despite that pedigree and recent history, like From Software's office, parts of Armored Core VI leave us underwhelmed. Other parts, excited and hopeful.

It's complicated.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (Multiplayer TBD) **PUBLISHER** Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER From Software **RELEASE** August 25

NEVER AN OPTION

Comparatively, from a critical and commercial standpoint, Armored Core was never a big deal. But for From, it's one of the most important releases in its catalog.

Founded in 1986 by Naotoshi Zin, From Software originally made business software before trying its hand at game development in the mid-'90s with a trilogy of action RPGs called King's Field, released for the original PlayStation between 1994 and 1996. While King's Field would later inspire its Souls games, Armored Core laid the real foundation for From as a game studio.

Funded in part by Sony, the original Armored Core was released in 1997. It wasn't a massive commercial hit, but it was, at least, an impressive outing for a then-still new game developer. Most notable was the game's approach to mecha customization, which allowed players to choose what weapons they took in their Armored Core's left and right hands, different parts of their bodies, and even the design of their color and logo. As *Next Generation* magazine pointed out in its July 1997 issue, "well over" 200,000 combinations were possible.

In Armored Core, a massive war called the "Great Destruction" has left Earth mostly uninhabitable. In this dystopia, giant corporations have taken rise. They employ pilots called Ravens, operating Armored Cores, who take jobs for whoever is willing to pay the most. Players would take on different

ARQUEBUS LASER RIFLE

BALAM ASSAULT RIFLE

BALAM PILE

BALAM SHOTGUN

missions and complete objectives to earn money to upgrade parts of their Armored Core. They could also choose how moral they thought a mission was.

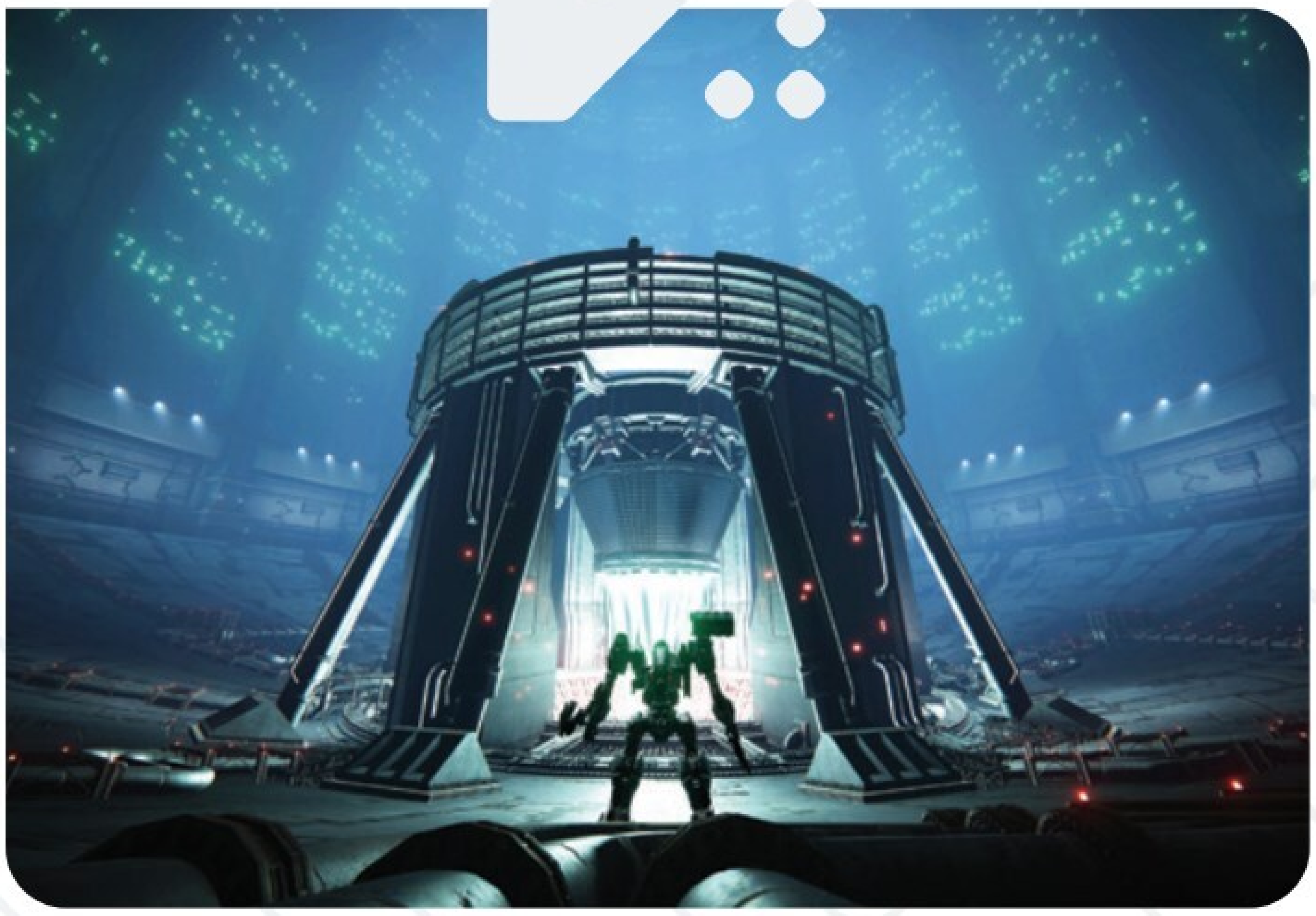
Armored Core remained part of From Software in the following decades, as the studio released 15 games across nearly as many platforms between 1997 and 2013. It also released dozens of other games in that time – such as the cult classic survival horror game Kuon, the Monster Hunter spin-off Monster Hunter Diary: Poka Poka Airou Village, and even a few different mecha games, such as the Xbox 360 Kinect game Steel Battalion: Heavy Armor and Mobile Suit Gundam Unicorn.

But in 2009, it released the first game in now a long-running genre that would become its bread and butter: Demon's Souls. Eschewing typical game design, it was brutally difficult, impressively obtuse, and unlike much else that came before. And miraculously, despite those facts, it became increasingly popular.

The ensuing Dark Souls series, Bloodborne, Sekiro, and Elden Ring (now called the Soulsborne games), made From, and by extension, its figurehead, Hidetaka Miyazaki, who made his directorial debut in 2006 on Armored Core 4 and then directed all of the Soulsborne games except Dark Souls II, household names in the video game world. They're now considered some of the most influential games of all time and spawned numerous imitators of varying degrees of quality, such as Koei Tecmo's Nioh series and Respawn Entertainment's Jedi series.

Armored Core took a backseat as the Soulsborne games took off; its last release was in 2013 with Armored Core: Verdict Day. But, according to producer Yasunori Ogura, the studio always planned to return to the series with which it first cut its teeth.

"Armored Core was always in the back of our minds," Ogura says via translator. "We're not a huge company, so of course, we have to consider resource allocation and timing and [development] timelines. And so it did take a little longer than we would have hoped. But it was never really an option not to make another Armored Core."



The seeds of Armored Core VI began in 2017. By the following year, Miyazaki and a small group of team members were building prototypes. And then, in 2019, after the release of Sekiro, a director finally came on board: Sekiro's lead designer, Masaru Yamamura, making his directorial debut at From Software.

Yamamura is now one of the few people to direct a game at From in the last decade that isn't Miyazaki.

He says it's been stressful taking this new role; he had to learn how to share ideas with his team and keep the vision consistent throughout (around a third of the entire company is now on Armored Core VI, we're told). But a few years into his new job, he's learning what kind of director he wants to be.

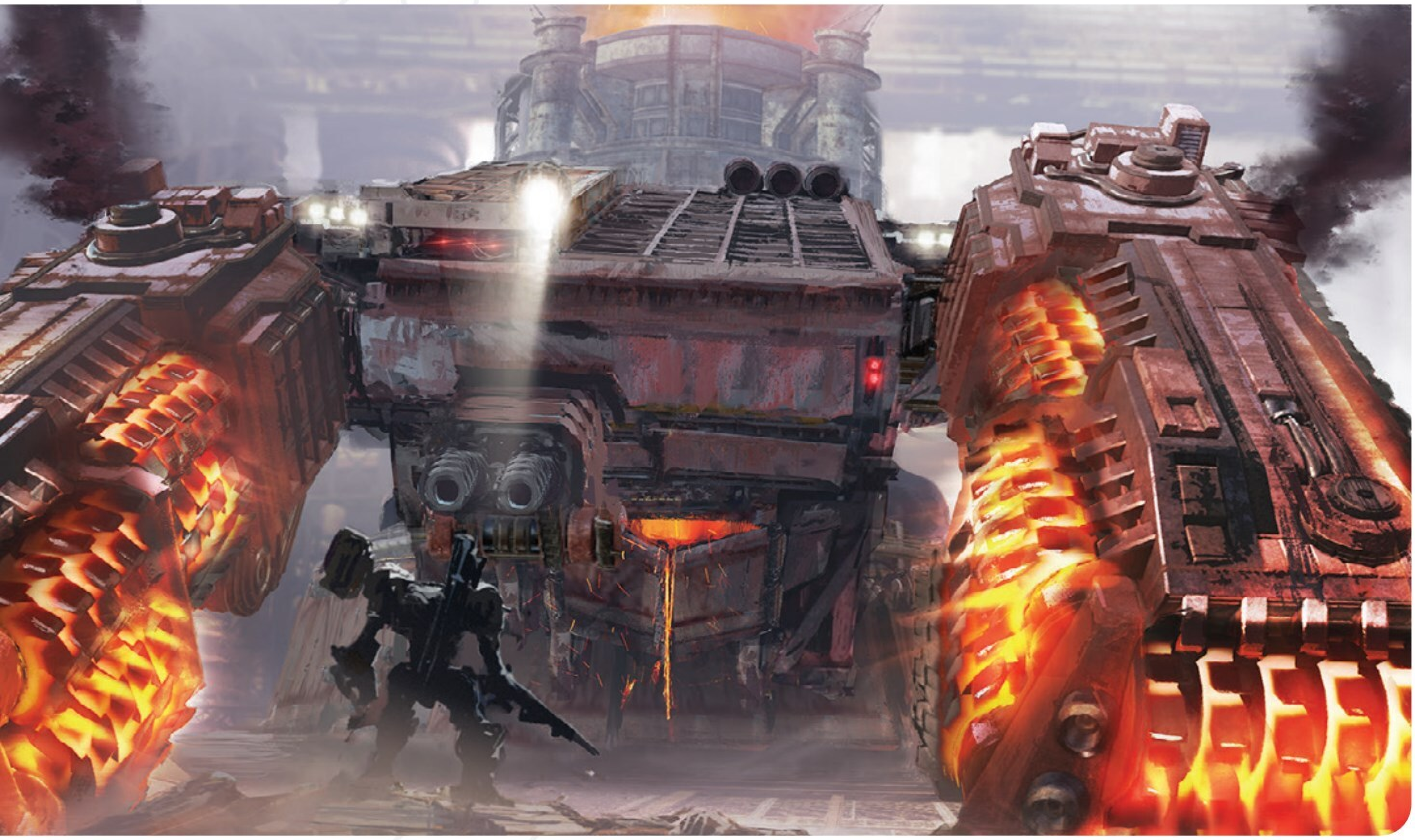
"Some directors will just be very top-down, and it's everything they say goes," Yamamura says. "Some directors like to get in there and like to get these ideas and discuss. I very much appreciate that second style. Rather than people fearing me [coming] along and saying, 'Oh, no, I'm going to be told what to do,' it's a discussion. It's like, 'Okay, I get to take this person's ideas and see how we can incorporate that. See how we can mix them with other ideas on the floor.' This is the approach that I've come to enjoy."

But there is the unavoidable proverbial crater left by Elden Ring, quickly considered not only one of From's best games but one of the greatest games of all time after its release in February 2022. As producer and director, respectively, Ogura and Yamamura admit they have a lot to live up to.

"It is scary," Ogura admits. "But you have to just sort of steel yourself and say, 'Alright, well, let's make this one count as well.'"

Making Armored Core VI count is, in some ways, keeping it in line with the Armored Core tenants.

Which is to say, it's not a Souls game. And that's an important distinction.



FORWARD THINKING AND DIVINATION

Despite the naming convention, Armored Core VI is a reboot of the series, though it maintains many ideas from the first game more than 20 years before. Similar to the original, a large-scale disaster – thought to be related to a powerful substance called Coral – decimates the planet of Rubicon. Now, 50 years later, trace amounts of the resource have been rediscovered, inciting a war between massive corporations controlling the military-industrial complex and the planet's indigenous factions. The protagonist, freelance mercenary C4-621, or callsign "Raven," arrives at Rubicon and is soon cast into the global conflict.

Historically, the mecha genre has always been grounds to explore real-world sociopolitical issues, and that's no different for the Armored Core series. Though in 2023, a world owned by megacorporations on the brink of environmental destruction feels far more accurate to life than it may have even in 1997. A point that isn't lost on the development team.

"These are key themes that have always run through the Armored Core series," Yamamura says. "So perhaps it was a little bit of forward thinking and divination when it came to that aspect."

Rubicon is a planet set aflame by industry. Alien structures perch above oceans of sand; monoliths pierce cloudy skies above mountain ranges; and factory assembly lines stretch out like a castle's ramparts. It's visually striking, and the emphasis on an impossible scale is dizzying.

But unlike the Soulsborne games, Armored Core VI does not feature an interconnected world. Instead, it returns to the series' stage-based roots, with distinct maps featuring segmented missions culminating in a boss fight. According to From, each stage varies in scale; some are large, inviting exploration and featuring side objectives; others are linear sprints toward a singular goal.

"If you're thinking of it in terms of [...] a game like Bloodborne, one Armored Core map is like one area in Bloodborne," Yamamura says. "Extrapolating it to that human scale, [the map] will be used across three to four missions."

We see two missions totaling two hours of gameplay and repeat boss attempts. The first is a short prologue mission – though we're not allowed to disclose details – that establishes and tests the fundamentals of piloting an Armored Core mecha. Next, we witness a stage from Chapter Two on Grid 086, a sky-high installation housing an orbital lift called the Intercontinental Cargo Launcher. Raven must use the device to cross an ocean separating him from the Central Icefield, a location significant to the game's story.

Outside, plumes of smoke brim into the atmosphere like geysers, the grid's network of steel beams contrast miles of empty airspace below, and evidence of production litters the stage in various forms of cargo. The scale and level design is fantastic, but we're still hoping for a stronger hook that makes us want to explore the world. Based on what we saw, levels are a bit bland. Especially interiors; we spend our time quickly going from point A to B, without much impetus to spend time poking around. Compared to other From games, all with fantastic, believable worlds, the lifelessness of Rubicon, though narratively appropriate, leaves us a bit cold.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU DIE?

Armored Core VI alleviates some of the pain of death compared to the Soulsborne games. *Some.*

Notably, when you die, you just reload the last checkpoint and try again, keeping all your resources; don't expect to have to run after some equivalent of "Souls," or risk losing all your progress. You're also given the option to access the assembly screen to recalibrate your mech and its attachments to try for a better approach.

While this may seem more forgiving than previous From Software games, boss fights still carry crushing defeat. Fighting any boss in the game takes a while, so death means repeated time and effort. Masochists rejoice.

A NEW DIRECTION

From the jump, we see what From calls "omnidirectional" game design, emphasizing the verticality of its massive levels and the ways players use their Armored Cores to get around. Jetpacks are essential for ascending, scaling large walls, and gaining better positioning against enemies. The Quick Boost serves as a dodge mechanic, while the Assault Boost propels the mech forward, allowing you to cover long distances quickly. Depending on the load-out, you can use an arsenal of shields, melee weapons, and ranged rifles to eliminate foes. The unique aspect of controlling mecha instead of humanoids is the ability to perform many of these actions simultaneously. In fact, you won't make much progress – especially against bosses – until adopting this mindset.

"This omnidirectional stuff [...] it takes time to learn," says Atsuo Yoshimura, a long-time producer at Bandai Namco, who most recently worked as chief producer on Elden Ring. "For the past 10 years, people have kept playing the Soulsborne and Sekiro games. The way they move is very horizontal, but [in Armored Core VI], they need to also apply vertical elements. On top of that, they also must figure out how to apply vertical movements to make sure they can get behind enemies."

"Honestly speaking, we are having difficulty properly communicating this to our target audience," Yoshimura later admits. "That's something we need to figure out."

And while we do agree that the messaging around the omnidirectional game design is messy and confusing, in practice, it's intuitive. When in control of a mech, it makes sense to be able to jetpack around freely and move at breakneck speeds. It also makes traversing through levels a breeze – though again, at least in the levels we see, leaves little impetus to poke around or stop to smell the roses. The game focuses on momentum, so throttling toward your objective makes the most sense. Despite its largeness, our mech navigates open airspace gracefully, its frame resembling an ice skater as it weaves around obstacles. It looks more akin to something like Bayonetta or Nier: Automata than, say, Dark Souls or Elden Ring. It represents a complete tempo change after a decade of slower-paced From games.

Even though it stresses that Armored Core VI is not a Soulsborne title, From has cultivated a particular fanbase in the last ten years. Many players could find the differences jarring. This game is arcadey in its generous checkpoints and scoring system, and outside of boss battles, it offers lenient action compared to Dark Souls. In the most straightforward terms, it's very similar to past Armored Core games, albeit with the robust boss fights the developer is now known for.

Back in the demo, a small handful of Muscle Tracers (a recurring enemy type in the series) guard the entrance to the grid's interior. As the Armored Core's stamina depletes mid-flight, it drops to the ground, sword in hand, and begins slashing through opponents' armor with its blue-hued Pulse Blade. While certain Muscle Tracers block ranged attacks with shields or high mobility, few are strong enough to sustain high-damage melee strikes. When combined with the speed of the Assault Boost, attacks adopt an empowering, cinematic quality. However,

BALAM 2-LEG

ARQUEBUS 2-LEG

if used indiscriminately, these big offensives can result in poor positioning and death.

You can restore your health three times via a repair mechanic, with periodic restock opportunities in specific areas. From says no upgrades are available to this mechanic, so players must strategically use their repair charges. Managing your health and general performance is essential, as it ties into Armored Core's scoring system and economy.

"You get rewards at the end of each mission," Yamamura says. "There are certain deductions or rewards based on your performance, how much damage you take, and additional objectives you've cleared. You get a new base income from missions, and then you can use that to buy parts and upgrade your mech."

ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

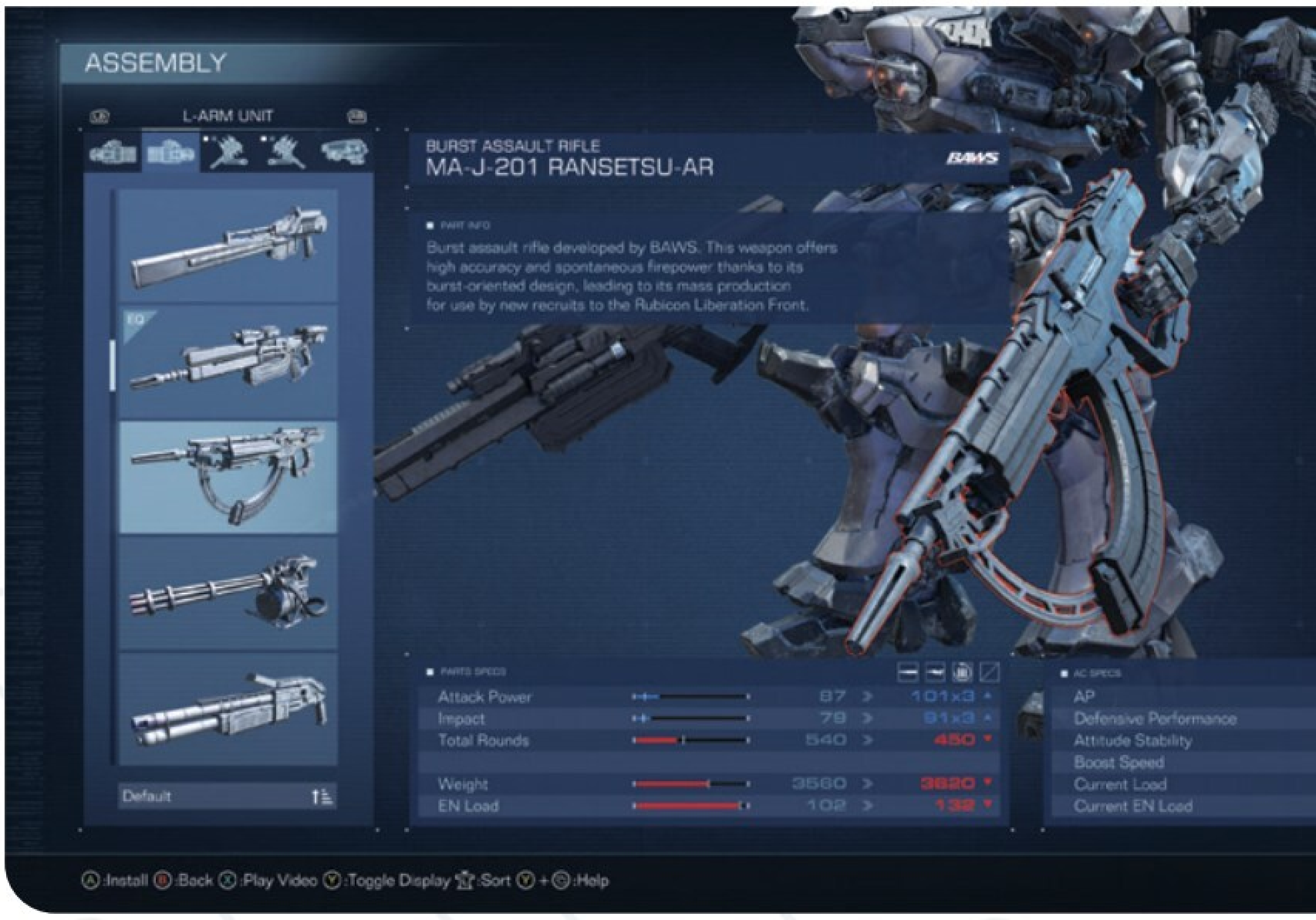
Every Armored Core features 12 customizable parts within four different categories: four "Unit" slots for artillery, swords, and shields; four "Frame" segments, accounting for the mech's head, core, arms, and legs; three "Internal" parts for customizing Fire Control Systems (lock-on targeting), boosters, and generators for customizing energy reserves; and lastly, one "Expansion" item which enables unique abilities like a massive electrical explosion.

While we didn't see most of them in action, dozens of attachments, weapons, and parts are within each category, totaling hundreds of individual components and combinations. As a From employee shows us his favorite loadout, we see tons of different rifles, shotguns, grenade launchers, chainguns, bazookas, pulse cannons, double-bladed swords, and shields. Thousands of possible combinations exist, but players must consider the mech's frame and weight capacity during assembly.

"Don't take too many notes," a nearby PR representative nervously laughs as he realizes our debug build has every customization option unlocked. Even if we wanted to, keeping track of the numerous components flying across the screen is hard. For fans of proper nouns, we quickly jot down words like "Pulse Scutum," "Vertical Missile Launcher," and "Stun Needle Launcher," the latter firing a projectile that explodes into a burst of electricity.

"There will be extensive cosmetic options – near infinite combinations of user-generated aesthetics, from decals, paint jobs, finishes, and weathering," Yoshimura says, exaggerating a bit. "People can upload and share their creations online." Considering the popularity of fashion in the From Software community – there's an entire "Fashion Souls" subreddit dedicated to sharing in-game outfits – this is a smart inclusion in Armored Core VI.

After clearing a few indistinct hallways and restocking health and ammunition, we finally encounter what we've been waiting for – a boss battle.


ASSEMBLY
L-ARM UNIT
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BAWS
PART INFO
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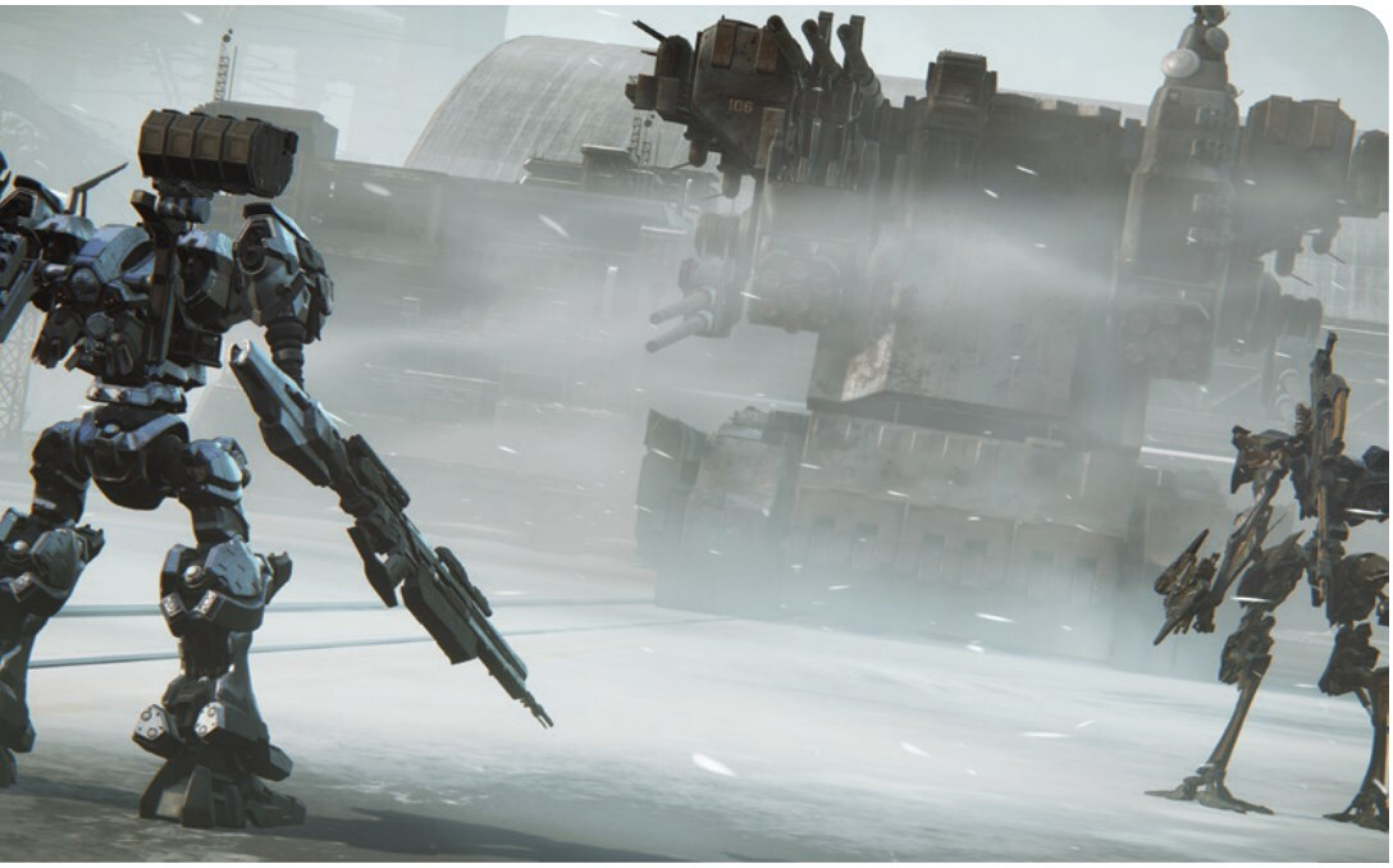
AC SPECS
Ⓐ:Install Ⓑ:Back Ⓧ:Play Video Ⓨ:Toggle Display :Sort Ⓨ+Ⓢ:Help

BURST ASSAULT RIFLE
MA-J-201 RANSETSU-AR

Burst assault rifle developed by BAWS. This weapon offers high accuracy and spontaneous firepower thanks to its burst-oriented design, leading to its mass production for use by new recruits to the Rubicon Liberation Front.

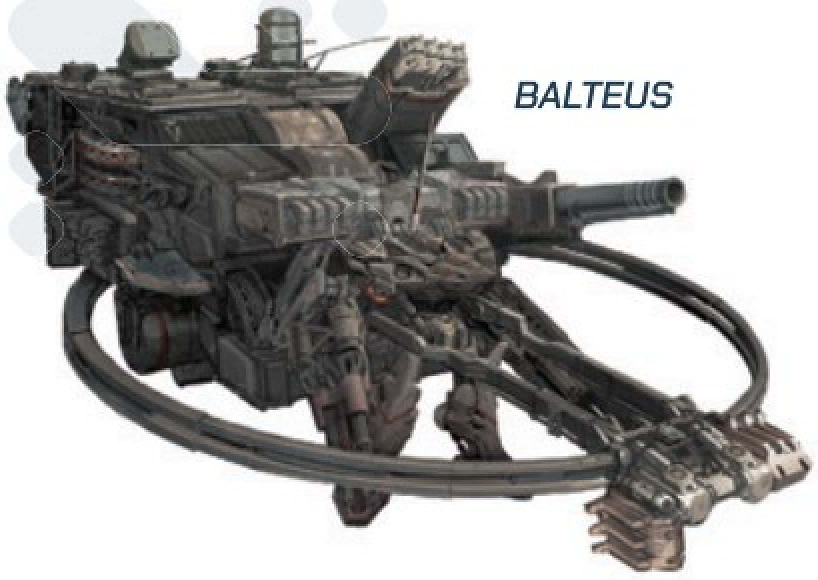
Attack Power	87	>	101x3 ▲
Impact	79	>	91x3 ▲
Total Rounds	540	>	450 ▼
Weight	3560	>	3820 ▼
EN Load	102	>	132 ▼

AP
Defensive Performance
Attitude Stability
Boost Speed
Current Load
Current EN Load



ARQUEBUS 4-LEG

BALAM TANK


BALTEUS

A large door opens, and a massive invention called the EC-0804 Smart Cleaner activates, dashing at us with incredible speed. Colloquially referred to as the "Roomba boss" by internal staff, the machine's base resembles a round, self-cleaning vacuum, with long, crab-like arms dripping with molten metal extruding from its sides.

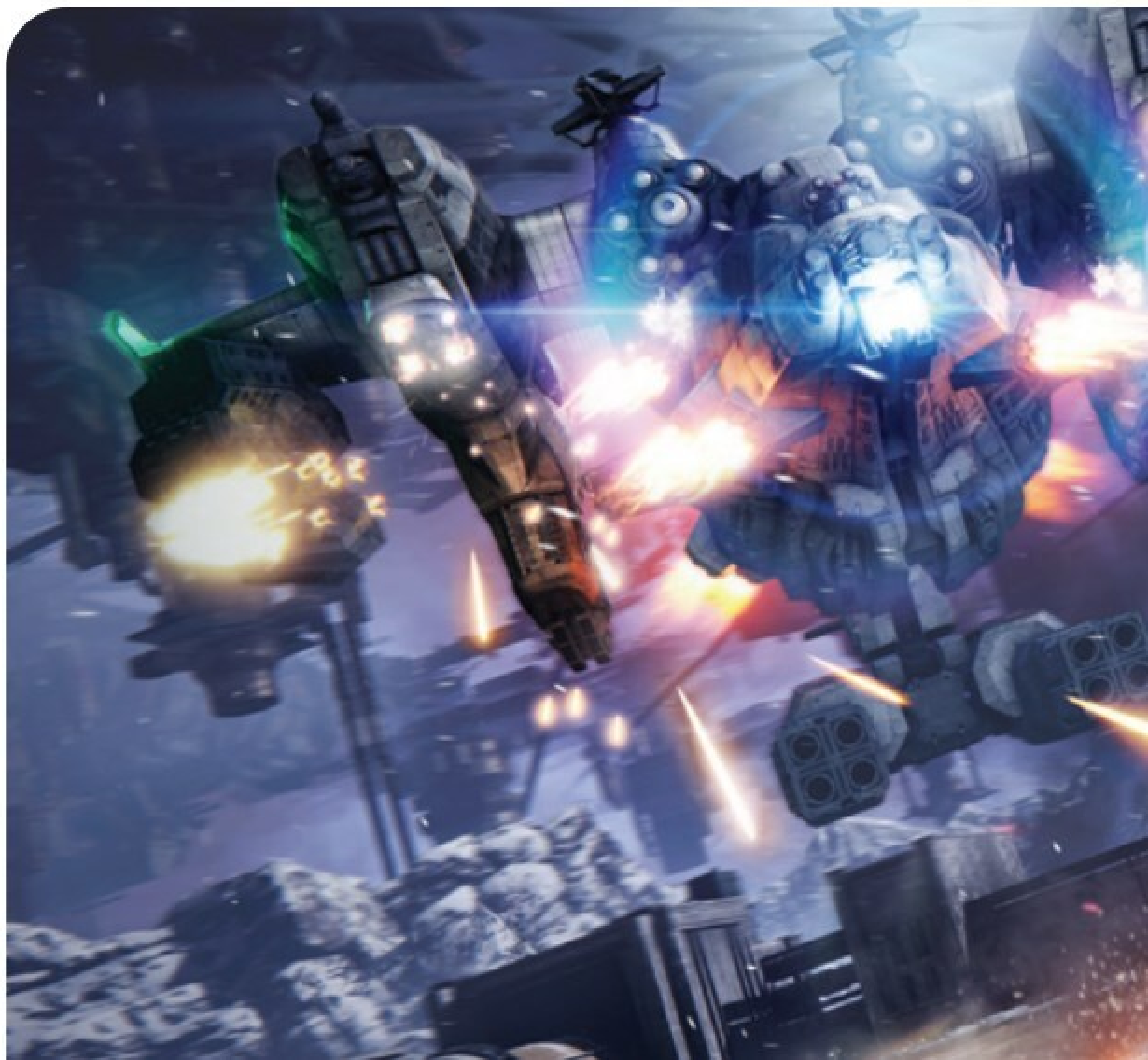
The Smart Cleaner strikes its arms together with intimidating power, trying to swat us like a fly. The sound of metal clashing against metal is haunting, but now we're hovering above the armored creation after evading its approach, peering down the chimney affixed to its rear. Before we fully recover, red-hot metal bursts out from the furnace, forcing a mid-air dodge to create adequate distance from the machine's area-of-effect attack.

Finally, we get our first glimpse of the boss's weak point: a small, open vent between its arms. We fire a missile barrage, and while its armor plates deflect much damage, the Smart Cleaner's stagger bar begins to build, immobilizing the enemy if filled.

"Regardless of whether it's mecha or humanoid, or the scale involved, one thing from our learnings [making Soulsborne games] we've taken is that observational aspect of boss battles and enemy encounters where you have to observe what the enemy is doing, watch their attack patterns, watch their attack animations, and then respond accordingly," says Yamamura. "You take that input, and then, you know, that's feedback to the player. And the player has to revise their tactics based on that. So that's one element that carries between these series. Plus, you have the kind of combat that is integral to being able to fly around freely and use multiple weapons simultaneously."

Compared to everything else we see in the game, boss fights are a true and expected standout. While the normal engagements look run-of-the-mill, at least compared to what we were expecting, bosses are cinematic and climactic. As the fight plays out, the entire room chants and groans after each successful and unsuccessful strike and attempt. It's exhilarating and a welcome highlight.

Like clockwork, the machine rushes and destroys our Armored Core in two hits. Thus begins the excruciating tried-and-true journey of trying to defeat the boss. More than half a dozen tries later, and the boss is down to its last shred of health. But like a cruel joke, we run out of ammo at the last second, and the cleaner disassembles us once again.



VERDICT DAY

Armored Core VI is in an unenviable position: being a From Software game in 2023.

While Armored Core has a decades-long history and an intense fanbase of its own, it's undeniable that the studio is and will ostensibly always be most well-known for its Soulsborne games. The vast majority of its fanbase at this point is most accustomed to its methodical RPGs.

This game is not that; it's clear from the moment we see it in action that the Armored Core series is not changing to fit what made From popular back in 2009. Through and through, Armored Core VI is an Armored Core game – for better and worse.

But the comparisons are inevitable and unavoidable; the change in gameplay is jarring after more than half a dozen Soulsborne games. And while there was much to be excited for in what we saw – predictably, the boss fights look fantastic, though they're notably the one area From says it took Souls inspiration – there are plenty of areas we're nervous about. Playing any Souls game, even basic encounters with grunt enemies can be memorable, as can nearly every inch of their game worlds. Of what we've seen of Armored Core, though the world looks great, the areas and encounters that aren't boss fights lack the same emotional pull.

Inevitably, Armored Core fans and some contingent of Soulsborne players will welcome the change of pace. Others might find it a bit dated after a run of revolutionary From games. We feel confident saying that because that's where we're both sitting after seeing the game – somewhere in the middle of excitement and trepidation.

But not for nothing, From has earned some trust over the last several years; it doesn't usually make bad games. Or at least, not recently, it hasn't. And so, for now, we're acknowledging our misgivings while also giving the studio some benefit of the doubt.

Time will tell if Rubicon becomes the next From Software world we lose ourselves inside. ■

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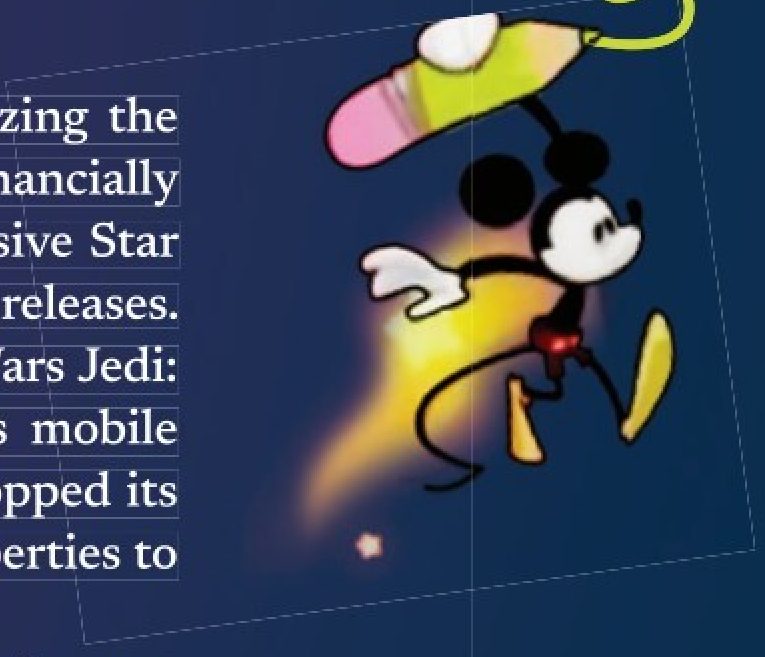
Mousing Around

How Dlala Studios is building Disney Illusion Island around the joy of movement and Mickey



Years ago, Disney reshaped its approach to gaming. Recognizing the potential to connect its global audience to the world's most financially successful entertainment industry, it shifted away from exclusive Star Wars contracts with EA, movie tie-ins, and various mobile releases. EA is still making Star Wars games – it just published Star Wars Jedi: Survivor earlier this year to critical acclaim – and various mobile games hit devices each year. But since 2019, Disney has dropped its ways of old, focusing more on connecting its intellectual properties to unique visions at various developers around the world.

With recent releases like Star Wars Jedi: Survivor from Respawn Entertainment and Marvel's Midnight Suns from Firaxis Games, and more games on the horizon, like Ubisoft's Star Wars: Outlaws and Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora, this shift has gone well for Disney, and the future looks bright. But those games, like most using Disney intellectual properties, are produced through licensing arrangements. Disney Illusion Island stands separate from all those with one key distinction: it's one of the first to be published by Disney Games, meaning it could be the first dud or hit with Disney's hand directly on it.

After playing Illusion Island for roughly four hours during an exclusive hands-on preview, including 30 minutes of 3-player co-op, I can confidently say that I think Disney has a hit on its hands. Unless something drastically changes after the game's opening three hours, Disney, platformer, and Metroidvania fans are in for a treat, and their children are, too.

by Wesley LeBlanc

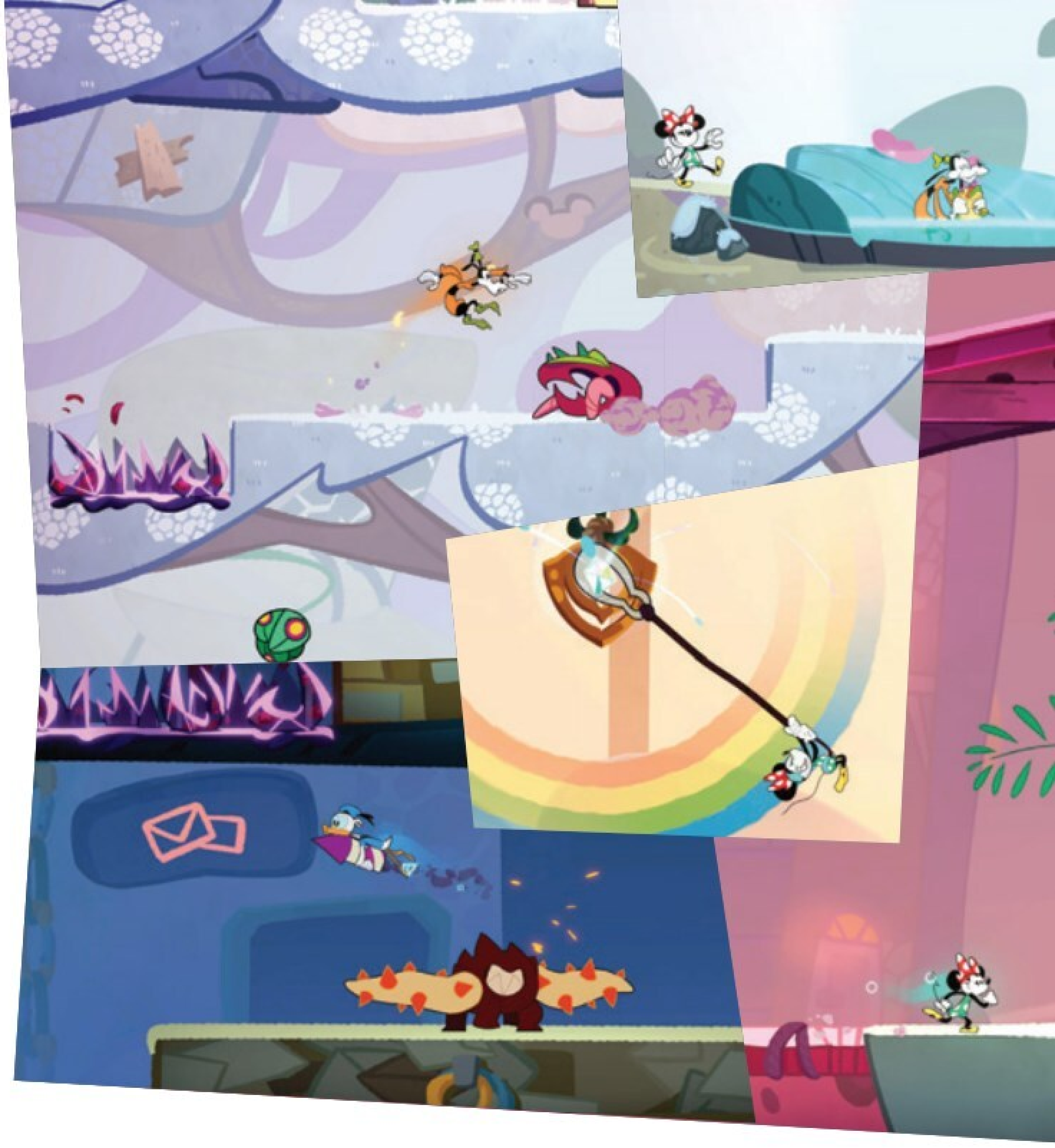
Illusion Island is beautiful, with an art style that sits confidently and uniquely between Mickey's Toontown aesthetic and the recent excellent Mickey Mouse shorts that have been running for a decade. As a result, cutscenes in Illusion Island feel just like Mickey Mouse cartoons. In gameplay, Mickey, Minnie Mouse, Donald Duck, and Goofy feel alive. While each character moves at the same speed and performs the same moves, differences in animation make each feel distinctly their own. For example, Goofy lumbers as he platforms while Mickey moves like classic animation come to life. These characters being voiced by the official actors adds to the feeling of authenticity.

"I obviously love the new stuff, but it's Mickey's entire history," Dlala Studios CEO and Illusion Island creative director AJ Grand-Scrutton tells me, explaining how Disney's entire back catalog of Mickey content inspired the game's visual style. "I am a massive fan of the '30s and '40s stuff where Mickey was quite cheeky [...] and quite naughty, doing stuff he might not necessarily do now.

"We got to hand-animate four of the most famous characters in history and it was a ton of fun. There are lots of silly animations in there, but really all that mattered to us was joy."

Dlala also created a new world for the broader Mickey canon in Illusion Island called Monoth, complete with many original characters. Grand-Scrutton shudders when I ask about adding to Disney's iconic canon. He says no word terrifies him more than "canon," but that the team tried creating a "wonderful story for Mickey Mouse and friends to go on," and if it's one referenced elsewhere by Disney, he'll "probably cry for two weeks straight from happiness."

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-to 4-Player Platforming
PUBLISHER Disney Games **DEVELOPER** Dlala Studios **RELEASE** July 28



Grand-Scrutton, lead designer Grant Allen, and the rest of the team I spoke to exude joy when talking about its game. Of course, Dlala's been working on it since completing development on Xbox's Battletoads revival in 2020, and it is the team's commercial product, but I sense genuine love for Disney in every answer I get. And the team knows its stuff, studying not just Mickey Mouse shorts and movies, but the entire ethos surrounding the character, from history to the theme parks and more.

Memorabilia Bundles litter Illusion Island's Metroidvania-esque map, which opens up as I acquire new abilities like an extended boost jump, wall jumping, and ground pound, which unlock pieces of Mickey Mouse history redone in Dlala's style. I find Pete's Underpants from 1990's *The Prince and the Pauper* and more from 1937's *Lonesome Ghosts* (Grand-Scrutton's favorite Mickey Mouse short).

Beyond making its mark on Disney history with new renditions of classic characters and props, Dlala's also memorialized various members of the 37-person studio with Tokun cards. These collectibles provide lore about original characters and creations and information about the team. One Dlala artist named Rachel is represented by Keh, who resides in Monoth's Gizmopolis and draws everyone who enters. Grand-Scrutton gleefully explains the story behind each in-game character's art and "lore" based on a different Dlala team member I encounter.

As I travel from Pavonia's Terrarium Town, which feels like a more natural area of Monoth compared to the mechanical underbelly of Gizmopolis, I found Illusion Island's platforming fun. If this is any indication, Illusion Island is more about the pleasure in exploration than the challenge. There are thousands of Glimt currency pieces to pick up while platforming through Monoth, and the more you collect, the more lore you unlock. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of collectibles like Memorabilia Bundles and Tokuns to find, too.

All images © 2023 Disney

Illusion Island doesn't appear to be a nail-biting experience. But I won't say I didn't die, or rather, get "stamped." Because Mickey and friends can't die, according to Disney rules, they get stamped and are instead turned into mail that respawns within various mailbox checkpoints.

This isn't surprising, considering a crucial part of the target audience is children. But there are built-in features to make the game more or less challenging. When you select a character, you choose how many hearts they have. You can select one, two, or three, but you can also set unlimited hearts. In multiplayer, characters can hug each other to gain a heart, jump off each other leapfrog-style for easier gap clears, and drop ropes to players below, letting them skip platforming elements altogether, something fans of 1992's World of Illusion might find familiar.

Dlala has included several quality-of-life features in Illusion Island's "Mickeyvania" style map. A small creature that the team dubs a hidizard appears to indicate a hidden area has already been explored. When I encounter a pathway I can't quite explore yet, a question mark appears on the map at that location. When I later obtain the ability I need, I see a new marker there that resembles the ability I now have that's needed to advance.

With no traditional combat, Allen tells me Illusion Island is about mastering movement and that Dlala tried to stick the balance between fun and progression of abilities. After playing it myself, that translates to finding joy in the capabilities of Illusion Island's mechanics. It's not about running up a hill of countless enemies designed to take you out at the slightest misstep. Most of the enemies I encounter don't feel like enemies but simply Monoth's inhabitants that happen to move and react hazardously.

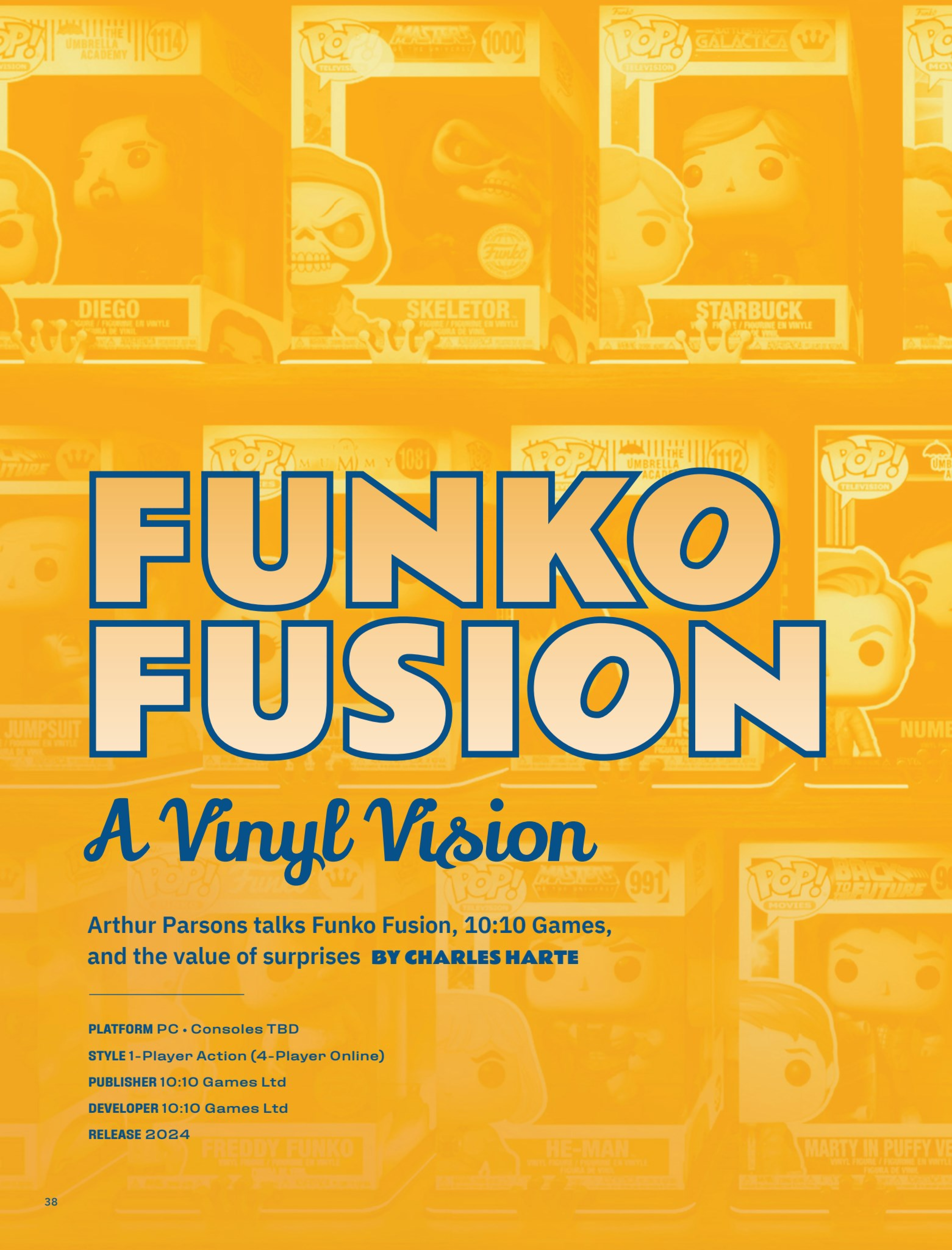
That is until I reach the game's first boss: a thief who holds one of the three tomes Mickey and friends have been tasked with retrieving for the good of Monoth. She sits in the center of the screen with a shield. Instead of attacking her directly, I platform over falling blades and other hazards to get a little higher on the large arena-like stage. There are yellow buttons I jump on to lower her shield. Once the shield's down, a hazard falling from above damages her, and after doing this a couple of times, with escalating dangers for me to platform around, the fight is over. I like how this boss fight provides the rush of combat without directly using combat, and I look forward to seeing how Dlala works around that void in other instances.

"I hate boss fights in games," Grand-Scrutton says. "It's easier to name your worst boss fight than your favorite, right? So for our creative vision [...], we go through the goals of what we're trying to achieve with this feature [boss fight]. This is the feeling we want the player to feel, and we steal a lot of that from the Imagineering approach because we all just really want to be like Imagineers.

"I think what we had for [this boss fight] was that it needs to feel like an embodiment of a mini-level. It was about viewing bosses as a single screen level rather than viewing the boss as an enemy you have to defeat. And it became much more about combining abilities and movement into something like a puzzle. We didn't miss combat. It just felt right, and it fits with the rest of the game."

This boss and the rest of what I play in Illusion Island come wrapped in a score from composer David Housden, who also composed the score for Dlala's Battletoads, and I couldn't be more impressed with what I heard. It's immediately memorable and whistle-worthy and is right at home in Disney's catalog of excellent music. It reminds me most of walking through Disney World's Magic Kingdom, which starts with magical whimsy on Main Street before diving into other genres as you cross into the parks' different lands. Considering Illusion Island's Monoth is split into various lands and biomes, it's easy to see how Disney's isolated approach to theme park lands inspires both Dlala's design and Housden's score.

This team clearly has the Disney chops; it knows the company's extensive and memorable history and fuses that with fluid and fun platforming, a vibrant and expansive world, and a new but lovingly crafted take on some of the most popular mascots in the world. So far, it's working on every level for me, but these types of games are all about the escalation in exploration, and I won't be able to judge that until Illusion Island hits Switch in July. That said, consider me happy to wait in the queue that is the time between now and release. I only hope the full ride waiting for me on the other side is worth the wait. ■


THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY
1114
DIEGO
MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE
1000
SKELETOR
BATTLESTAR GALACTICA
STARBUCK
MUMMY
1081
1112
JUMPSUIT
991
BACK TO THE FUTURE
FREDDY FUNKO
HE-MAN
MARTY IN PUFFY VE

FUNKO FUSION

A Vinyl Vision

Arthur Parsons talks Funko Fusion, 10:10 Games, and the value of surprises **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PC • Consoles TBD

STYLE 1-Player Action (4-Player Online)

PUBLISHER 10:10 Games Ltd

DEVELOPER 10:10 Games Ltd

RELEASE 2024

POP! MOVIES
THE MUMMY
1081
POP! MOVIES
THING
POP! TELEVISION
THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY
POP! TELEVISION
GALACTICA
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PRINCE A
THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY
931
KLAUS

As I speak with Arthur Parsons, design director at 10:10 Games, about his upcoming game Funko Fusion, I notice he keeps mentioning a desire to include the unexpected. When I press him on it, he responds with a glimpse into his game design philosophy.

"You have to give people what they expect," Parsons says. "But what you've got to do is then – you've got to go above and beyond that and give them the unexpected. Because it's at that point that they'll really truly engage with you."

The reveal trailer for Funko Fusion is full of the unexpected. The family-friendly title puts players into the oversized heads of Funko Pop figures modeled after characters from popular NBCUniversal IPs. Some franchises like Jurassic World are geared toward the young audience the aesthetic would seemingly attract, while others are certainly not. From classic '80s franchises like Masters of the Universe and Back to the Future, to horror films like *Child's Play* and John Carpenter's *The Thing*, there are a lot of characters in the reveal trailer kids today probably wouldn't recognize.

"Everybody's a fan of something," Parsons says. "Everybody, no matter what their age, they like something. Whether it's something from childhood, something that's current, [or] something that they can share with their friends, people like content: TV shows, movies, pop culture, whatever it is. And we were just like, 'Right, cool, let's do a video game that celebrates stuff – the stuff that people love.'"

PURE OFFICES

10:10 Games team

Arthur Parsons

MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE
SKELETOR ON NIGHT STAL
SKELETOR ON P
TRAP JAW
SKELETOR
HE-MAN ON
10:10 GAMES

THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY
DIEGO
JUMPSUIT

Forging a Head

Overall, the response to Funko Fusion's reveal has been positive, encouraging the team at 10:10 Games, which has worked in secrecy for the past 18 months. While the leads at the company have plenty of experience under their belts, much of the team is brand new to the industry and had never been behind the scenes for a reveal like this before.

"We had those nervous moments of 'have we made the right decision?' putting in stuff that potentially people that are only in their late 30s or 40s are going to recognize," Parsons says. "And [when] we started seeing people's comments and reading articles and [hearing from] colleagues in the gaming press and stuff, it was like, 'Okay, cool. I think this is the right choice.'"

As many people did during the height of the pandemic, Arthur Parsons was reevaluating his life. Since 1997, he had worked at Traveler's Tales, a developer now known for its work on the Lego games. Parsons says he "wasn't cool enough" to work on the first Lego Star Wars, but he took on a designer role for the original Lego Batman, and eventually worked his way up to head of design at the company. But after more than 20 years of working at the same company, Parsons felt it was time for a change.

"I think I want to challenge myself," Parsons says he remembers telling his wife. "I think I want to not be comfortable. I want to do something creatively challenging. If I don't do it now, I'm not going to ever do it."

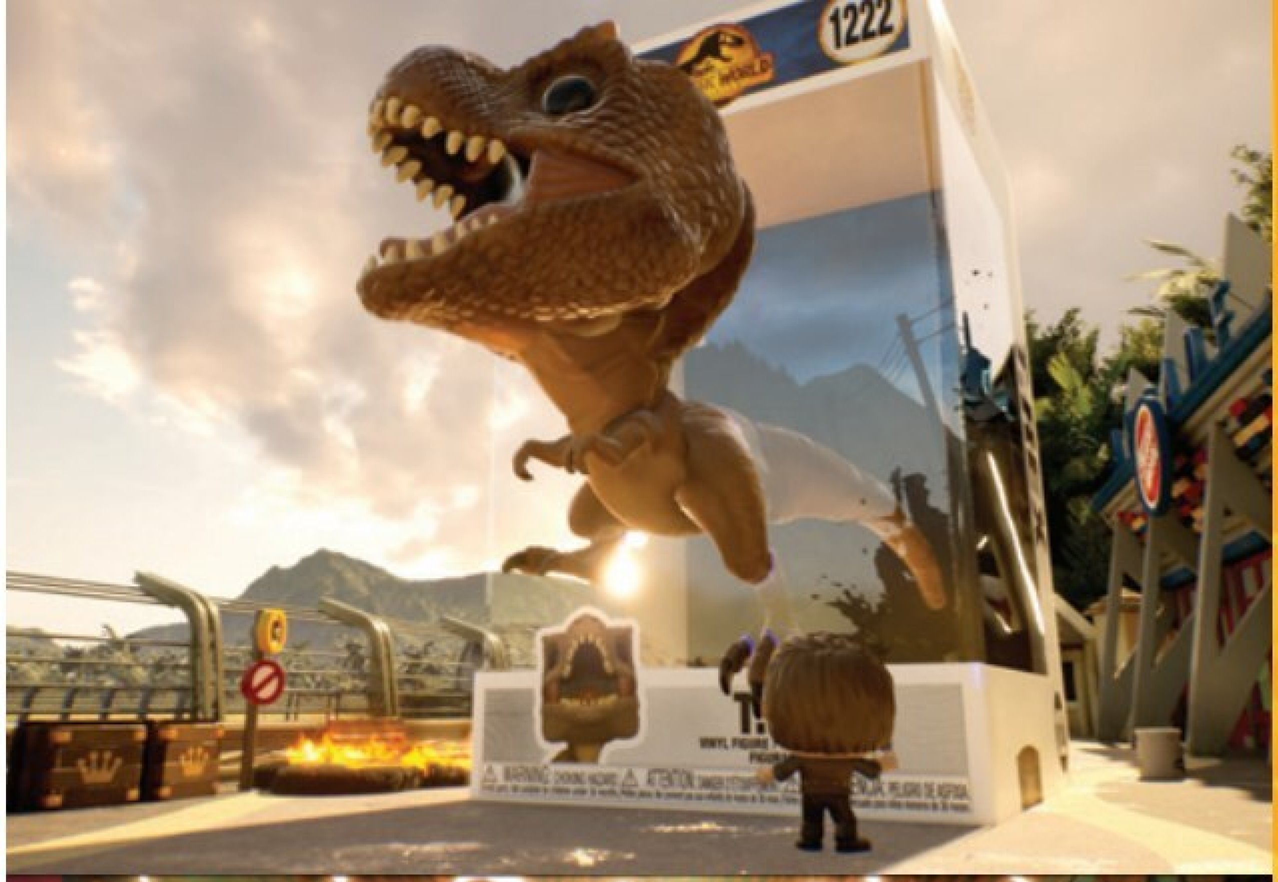
Ultimately, Parsons left his steady job with no concrete path for the future; his plan was to take some time off, and then maybe try to start an indie studio. Before he had a chance to flesh out any potential ideas, he got a call from Jon Burton, his former boss at TT Games, asking if Parsons wanted to work with him again. The two of them (along with Paul Flanagan, another former TT Games employee) became the founding members of 10:10 Games.

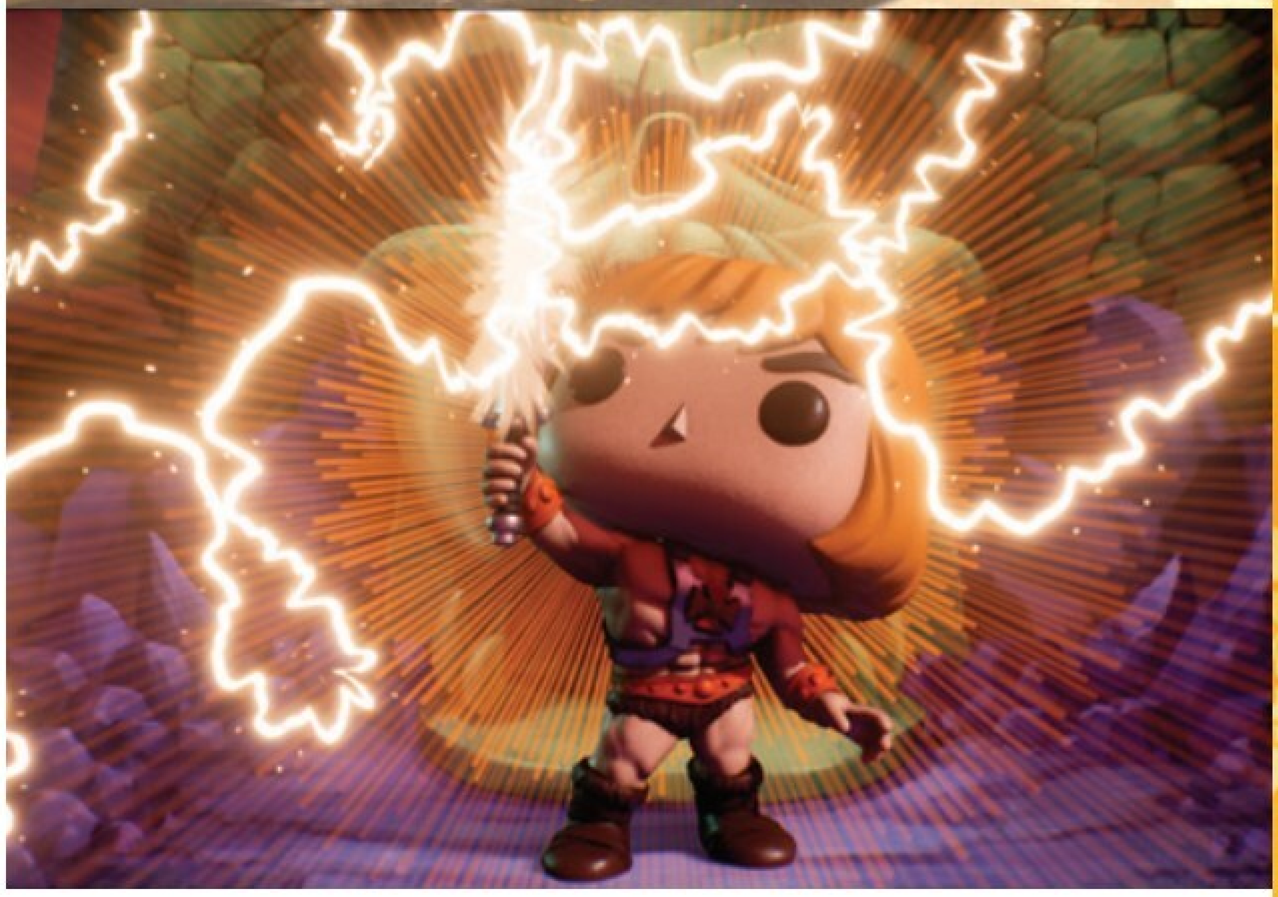
Funko
FUSION
10:10 GAMES

Something for Everyone

Parsons cites the founders' experience with Lego as a chief reason for their partnership with Funko and NBCUniversal. "What's our wheelhouse, in terms of our experiences?" Parsons says. "We've worked with the world's biggest IP." After some of the earliest talks, the team was given a spreadsheet of everything NBCUniversal was willing to license out, and the heads of 10:10 got to have their pick of what to include.

Part of the reason Funko Fusion features such a wide range of properties is that the target audience is "pretty much anyone 13 to 45." Parsons chuckles as he says, "We didn't really narrow it down much." That wide range is a key part of the appeal. I can see an ideal scenario in the team's eyes where a child is playing with their parent, with the former playing as





their favorite character from *Jurassic World*, and the latter playing a favorite character from their childhood, like Marty McFly or He-Man.

"You know to some people like my kids, who are between 16 and 26," Parsons says, "He-Man [...] is a meme, it's not a thing, if that makes sense. To see all those people like me that grew up on that like, 'this is what I've been waiting for' [...] to see all those comments was great."

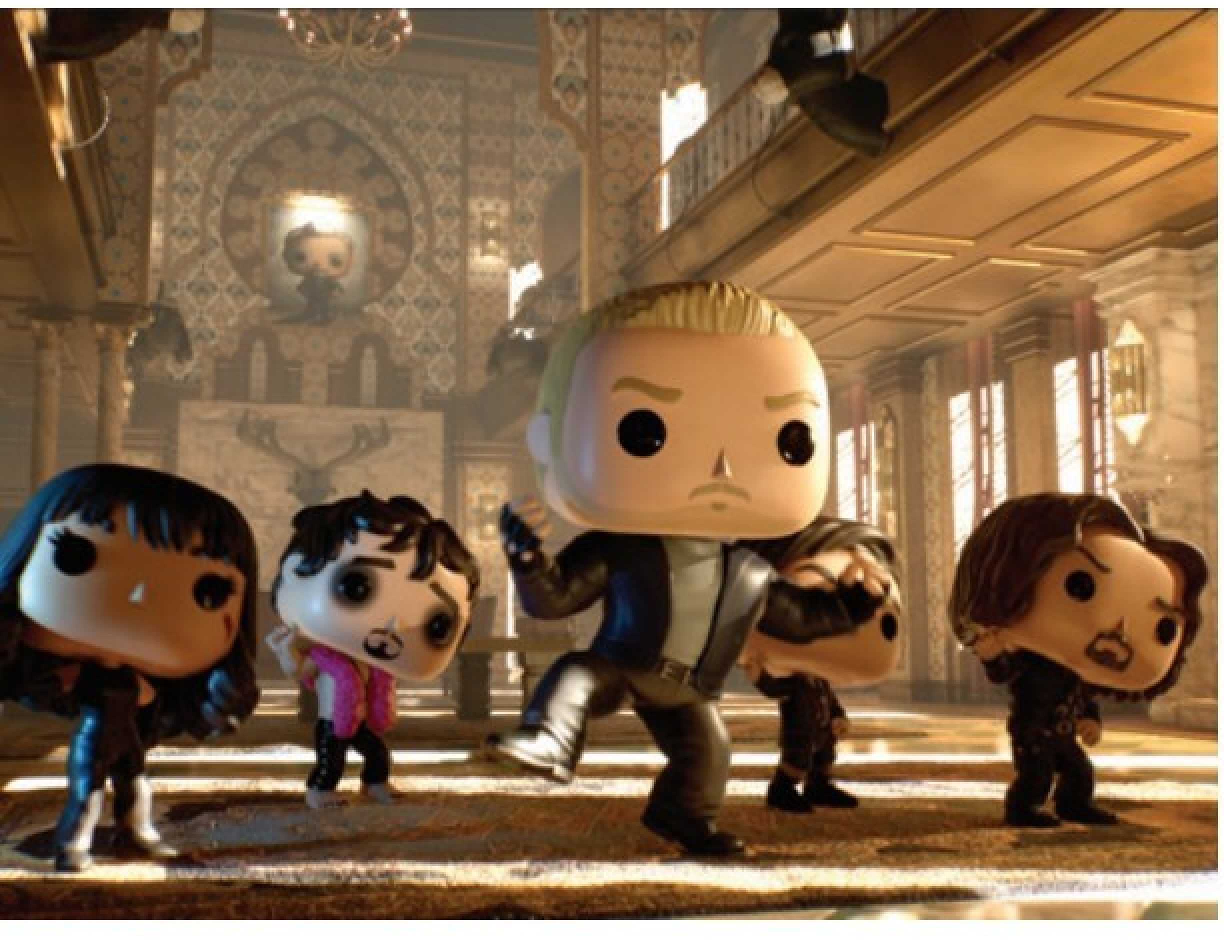
To facilitate this dynamic, Funko Fusion will have online four-player co-op. When I ask whether or not there will be local multiplayer as well, Parsons is open to the idea, but says it's a bridge they haven't crossed yet.

"I think we'd be remiss to dismiss having local, definitely local two-player co-op," he says. "I think four-player could be a stretch locally, with everything that we're throwing at the game and screen, you know. We don't want to compromise that experience, but we're definitely not ruling out having local co-op in there, as well."

Fusing Fiction

Structurally, the game is divided into different worlds, with each dedicated to a different IP. One might take you to space in the Battlestar Galactica while another brings you into the Hargreeves mansion from *The Umbrella Academy*. Gameplay consists of puzzle-solving, cartoony combat, and exploring the worlds for secrets. While there will be a story to follow, Parsons clarifies, "We're not doing a faithful retelling of a story. We're doing like, a celebration of that story. A celebration of that IP."

Worlds are designed to be revisited. Even after you complete an area, unlocking other characters (Chucky from *Child's Play* is used as an example) can trigger conditions to unlock new, hidden areas in previous worlds. Parsons describes it as "constantly evolving," and "definitely not a linear experience." The structure also allows them to add more IP, which sounds like a likely scenario. Even now, the team is reevaluating the initial list of IP from NBCUniversal and giving properties a second look. This is separate from a secret list Parsons keeps off camera, reminding him of the franchises currently in the game that he's not free to speak about yet.



The game will also allow you to customize characters to suit your needs. Using vinyl (an in-game currency), players can activate what Parsons refers to as an "in-game 3D printer," and print off abilities that belong to other characters. For example, Number Five from *The Umbrella Academy* has the ability to teleport. By using vinyl to print off a Temps Commission briefcase, any character can hold it and gain that ability. You'll have to unlock the blueprint first, though. Ultimately, 10:10 hopes the vinyl molding mechanic will let players play as their favorite characters for longer.

Parsons isn't just passionate about the unexpected because it's fun to surprise people. It's because surprising people in the right way allows you to engage with them with a level of depth that's otherwise difficult to achieve. "The best things are the things that people talk about," he says. "If you find something in a video game that blows your mind, you're going to tell someone." Funko Fusion is going to give players plenty of surprises; 10:10 Games just hopes those players will be talking about those secrets afterward. ■

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STARFIELD

A whole new world(s)

For all its time in development, and people being aware of its existence ever since a trademark for the name was uncovered in 2013, explicit details about Starfield have mostly been light. We've known it is a sci-fi game about traveling between planets from the creators of Skyrim for some time, but after Microsoft's Xbox Games Showcase, Bethesda pulled back the curtain in a big way with its own dedicated look at the title.

Alongside showing plenty of gameplay covering everything from walking around densely populated cities to exploring unpopulated planets to combat inside and outside spaceships, Bethesda also detailed some of the game's story and impressive customization options.

Like past Bethesda games, you find plenty of stories off the main path, but during the 45-minute presentation, we learned about an organization called Constellation that will be driving the main story. The group is a mythical collective, thought expired by many, that consider themselves the last true explorers of the galaxy. The group is trying to answer humanity's biggest remaining questions. They have discovered some strange alien technology, and for some reason, it seems to be connecting to you, the player character. The artifact spoke to you for some mysterious reason, so Constellation wants you to explore it further. In terms of player direction, that means you must enter space to figure things out, and do basically whatever you want along the way.

In Starfield, New Atlantis is a massively populated city under the jurisdiction of the United Colonies. Other cities that aren't part of the United Colonies are found further afield. These are the Freestar Collective planets and cities, which function more like the wild west. In fact, footage of these regions looks more like Fallout locations than futuristic Starfield sci-fi hubs. And going even further, outside the bounds of civilized space, as Bethesda refers to it, are unclaimed planets and systems to explore.

Bethesda says there are more than 1,000 planets in the game. As you scan and land on them, randomized elements affecting layout and creatures will ensure your experience on a certain planet will be different than that of a friend over on their own Starfield save file.

If you're more interested in designing your own fun than seeing what's out in the universe for you, Bethesda showcased its impressive customization options, which start with your player character. Character creation tools are improved from Bethesda's past efforts, and you can also define your character's backstory and select optional traits to personalize your character further.

Some unexpected optional traits included picking your religion, which dictates how you interact with certain groups, or electing to have a superfan join your crew who can be an obnoxious but helpful stalker (a clear reference to Oblivion's Adoring Fan character). You can even elect to send money home to your parents, which makes them become actual characters you can visit.

Along with overhauling its character creation tools to make yourself look however you want, you can also customize your spaceship, crew, homes and outposts on other planets, and your weapons. You can purchase a spaceship at any port and customize and upgrade it with new parts. But even those individual parts can be customized, upgraded, and in some cases, reshaped. Bethesda showed ships that looked like your typical cool spaceships, but it also showed ships that look like animals and one particularly strange ship that looked like an awkward, squat mech. It took off and flew into space, despite its peculiar shape.

The customization and building options are an evolution of the tools first introduced in Fallout 4 where players could make their own outposts, but in Starfield, you can build from a new overhead perspective and then make smaller design changes by zooming in close.

The biggest takeaway from everything Bethesda showed is that Starfield is a humongous game. Looking closely at individual elements of the latest footage also showed impressive combat, jetpack maneuverability, and exciting space dogfights, but it's hard not to zoom out to try and fathom just how massive Starfield will be. Bethesda shared bullet points like how New Atlantis is the biggest city it has ever built and how many planets there are, but I fear we won't have a true sense of the scale until we enter space and see how far we can fly. It's an intimidating universe, but one we're excited to explore. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Bethesda Game Studios
DEVELOPER Bethesda Softworks **RELEASE** September 6

ASSASSIN'S CREED MIRAGE

Scaling down, glowing up

After six years of massive open-world RPGs, Ubisoft's long-running Assassin's Creed franchise is returning to its stealth-based, dense city roots with Assassin's Creed Mirage, and the more I see, the more excited I get for October. I've enjoyed the series' foray into RPGs over the years, but 2020's Assassin's Creed Valhalla, which took me more than 100 hours to roll credits on, left me exhausted and burnt out with what Ubisoft had done to a franchise whose games previously took 20 hours to beat.

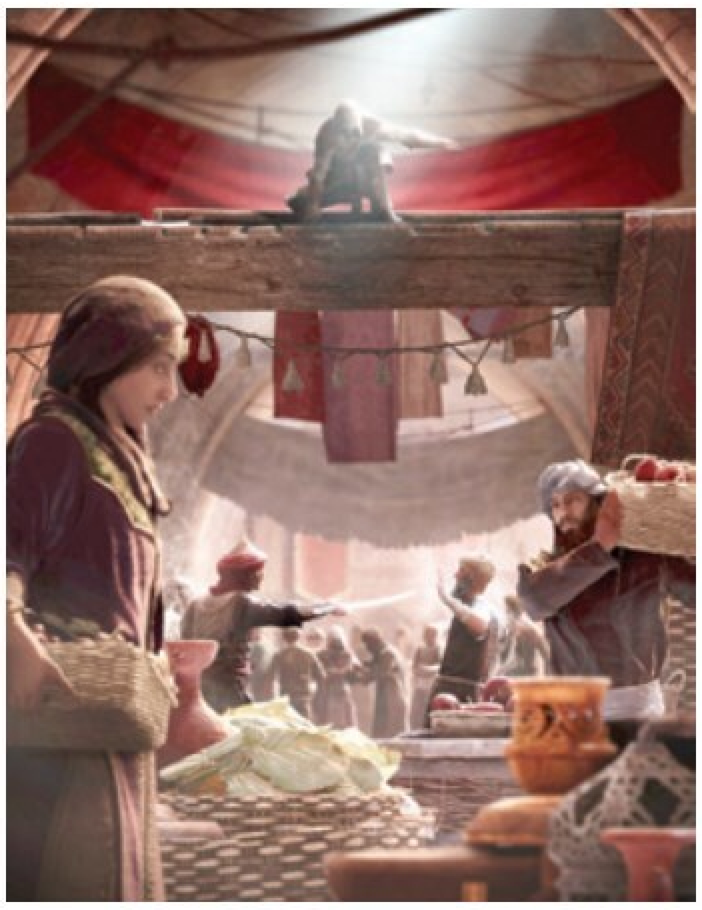
Following a recent preview event featuring new gameplay and details, I'm hopeful Mirage will reinvigorate my love for this series. In it, we play Basim, who previously appeared in Valhalla as the Assassin that brought protagonist Eivor into the Hidden Ones, only to be left feeling more like an enemy than a friend by the end of the game. That's because Valhalla reveals Basim to be the Asgardian trickster Loki, setting wide expectations for the series' future.

Mirage narrative director Sarah Beaulieu tells me Mirage handles that revelation in some way, stopping short of revealing how. She says Mirage keys players into how Basim goes from street thief to assassin to where he's at by the end of Valhalla. He cuts his teeth on the densely packed streets of Baghdad during the 9th Century, and Beaulieu says Baghdad is comparable in size to Assassin's Creed Unity's Paris or Assassin Creed Revelation's Constantinople. She also calls Mirage's narrative a self-contained coming-of-age story. It doesn't feature any modern-day storytelling or segments as a result.

In the snippets of gameplay I see, Midinat-Al-Salam looks more parkour-able than any city in the past half-decade of Assassin's Creed games. Its streets are tight and filled with NPCs who, thanks to the crowd-blending mechanic's return, can act as your key into otherwise impenetrable areas. But if that doesn't work out, you can always take to the rooftops, where paths are built for fast-paced traversal. Pass over, pass under, corner swings, and pole-vaulting moves fill Basim's parkour repertoire, as does the ability to have local street heralds lower your notoriety.

That's especially important in helping Basim maintain a low profile when infiltrating fortresses and enemy outposts. His eagle Enkidu helps stake these out, but new marksman enemies can prevent that, so you must take them out first. You have access to six primary tools, each upgradable, including smoke bombs, blow darts, throwing knives, noisemakers, and more. These tools, combined with Basim's new Assassin's Focus ability, which slows down time to allow him to quickly target and take out multiple enemies, make swift assassinations a breeze.

Something I especially like is Assassin Bureaus and their place in Mirage's gameplay. Basim can pick up contracts in these various hubs to complete assassinations, side quests, rescue missions, and more. An Investigation Board here replaces the quest board seen in previous Assassin's Creed games to track the activity of the antagonistic Order of the Ancients, and it feels more in line with classic games of the series.



Mirage borrows some U.I. imagery and mechanics from the RPGs of the series, but beyond that, it really does seem to look and play like an Assassin's Creed of the early 2010s, and I mean that in the best way. My biggest worry is it will further highlight how exhausting Ubisoft's Assassin's Creed RPGs are, but that's a problem for Assassin's Creed: Codename Red, the next in that vein of games set in feudal Japan. For Mirage, returning to the roots that made this series so popular to begin with might be the smartest decision Ubisoft could have made for this 2023 entry. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4
Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Ubisoft
DEVELOPER Ubisoft Montreal
RELEASE October 12, 2023

STAR WARS OUTLAWS

The scoundrel experience

Ubisoft Massive unveiled its long-awaited open-world Star Wars game during the Xbox Games Showcase and further outlined the experience the following day during Ubisoft's Forward presentation. Set between *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*, Star Wars Outlaws follows protagonist Kay Vess, voiced by actress Humberly González, and her companions, Nix, a cute creature belonging to the Merqaal species, and a cloaked droid named ND-5, as they embark on a grand heist. Massive describes its third-person adventure as an "original scoundrel story" featuring vast environments, seamless land-to-space travel, and a dynamic Wanted system that requires the player to evade capture.

One of Outlaws' most promising features is a faction reputation system, which shapes the world in small ways based on dialogue choices and other decisions like choosing a subtle or aggressive approach in specific missions. During an official gameplay walkthrough, Kay and Nix steal an illicit item from the Pyke Syndicate on behalf of a newly-met broker. While the pair successfully stealth through part of the mission, violence eventually erupts after the Pykes catch them, and despite escaping the group, Kay's reputation with the syndicate suffers. When she finally returns to the broker, an Imperial agent interrupts Kay's business, presenting the player with a choice: bribe or do not bribe.

"One of the key things we wanted to do was allow players to go into the fantasy of being a scoundrel, and part of that fantasy is being able to talk, to have a voice and roleplay," says creative director Julian Gerighty. "Dialogue choices like that give you the agency to craft your decisions in different circumstances."

Kay Vess chooses not to bribe the officer in the demo, resulting in the Empire creating a wanted alert and chasing her. Like in Grand Theft Auto, players can remove this status by evading the Empire for long enough. Vess and company flee to orbit on *The Trailblazer*, the game's player-controlled ship, and avoid a large dogfight by entering hyperspace. After successfully escaping, a quest completion alert flashes across the screen, featuring Star Wars' retro typeface.

"When dealing with syndicates, you're going to have choices, which will affect your reputation with them. [In the gameplay walkthrough], we saw that your reputation took a ding because you were recognized while infiltrating and stealing something from the Pykes," Gerighty continues. "Your decisions will influence your reputation based on how you want to play the game. [...] Good reputation leads to more access, access to the faction territories, better store prices, and exclusive missions and contracts. But if you get on [the faction's] bad side, they're going to send people after you."

While there aren't branching narrative threads in Star Wars Outlaws – just one authored storyline – Gerighty tells us players' reputations with each faction at the end of the game are unique to their choices. The player interactions Outlaws is promising seem to offer an exciting amount of systemic depth, and the game's planetary exploration paints an impressive picture compared to Ubisoft's typical open-world formula.

I'm excited to learn more about which planets we can explore, how dense they are, and how the reputation and wanted systems influence player choice. Alas, we have a while to wait before we can find out how it works for ourselves sometime in 2024.

BY ALEX VAN AKEN

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Watch our extended Star Wars Outlaws interview with creative director Julian Gerighty on Game Informer*'s YouTube channel to learn how Ubisoft Massive is partnering with Lucasfilm Games to create original planets and characters*

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft
DEVELOPER Ubisoft Massive **RELEASE** 2024

MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2

Kraven for more

After years of waiting, Insomniac finally unveiled the proper first look at Marvel's Spider-Man 2's explosive gameplay. But after previously teasing Venom's involvement, we got an unexpected look at Peter donning the black symbiote suit and the newfound abilities – and aggression – that come with. Miles Morales also gets a gameplay glow-up, and the two spiders will need everything they can muster to fight against a growing number of threats.

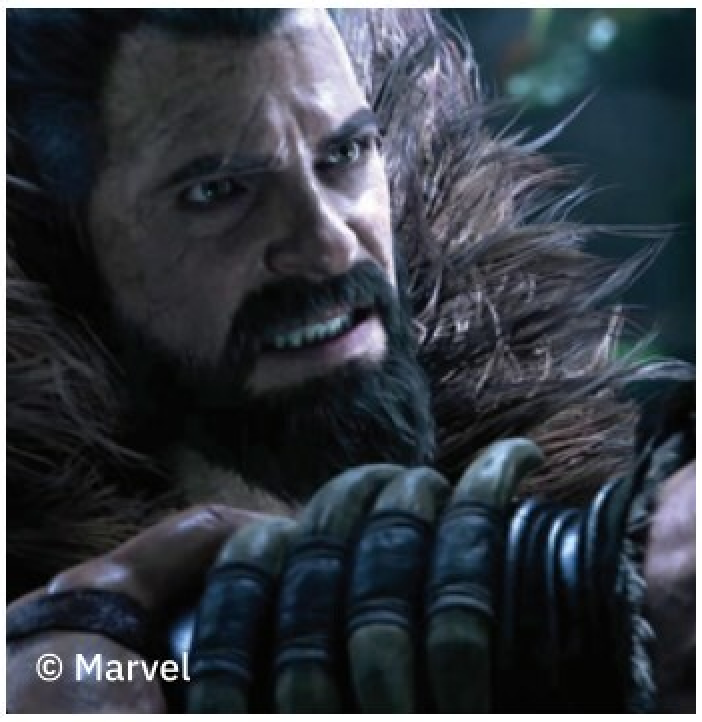
Chief among those villains is Kraven the Hunter. This maniacal warrior heads to the concrete jungle of New York City in search of worthy prey, which means bad news for Peter, Miles, and their allies. Namely, Dr. Curt Connors, AKA the Lizard, finds himself in Kraven's crosshairs, setting up an exciting chase sequence as the two webheads race to stop the hunter from turning Connors into his next trophy.

Kraven's not coming alone. He's got an entire military behind him called Kraven's Hunters, the game's new enemy faction. We see this goon squad attempt to ambush Connors at his home, but a black-suited and furious Peter Parker greets them instead. Those familiar with the symbiote storyline know that the alien brings out the worst of Pete's personality, and his array of brutal symbiote attacks show he's not pulling his punches. For example, Peter can unleash giant tendrils that violently seize and slam as many as four opponents simultaneously. While the action retains the dance of chaining combos while skillfully dodging attacks tipped off by a spider-sense warning, Symbiote Spidey appears a lot more headstrong in his approach, offering a nice contrast to his younger partner.

Miles Morales relies on an expanded suite of bioelectric abilities, such as the ground-pounding Thunder Burst attack and multi-zapping Chain Lightning. He's also got new gadgets, including the Web Grabber, which yanks multiple enemies into one easy-to-humble package. Additionally, both Spiders now sport Web Wings, which turns the classic armpit webbing into wingsuit-style gliders used to soar across the city while web swinging quickly. We saw a glimpse of a mini-game challenge tasking the Spider-Men to fly through rings. Stealthily eliminating foes is easier thanks to the Web Line, which lets players cast lines across environments to tiptoe above enemies and get the drop on them.

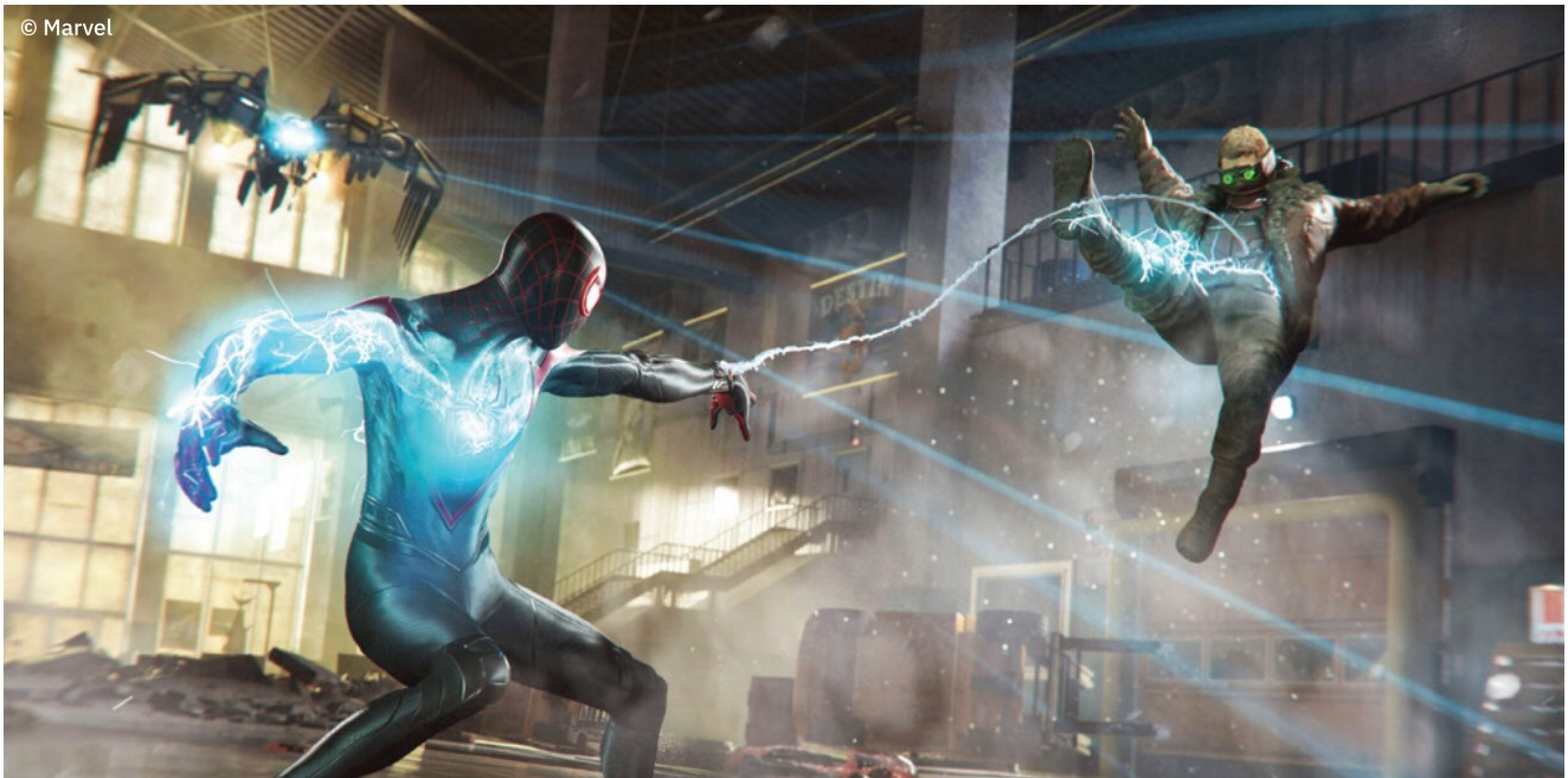
Insomniac has also reiterated that there's no co-op. Instead, players will seamlessly switch between Peter and Miles during scripted story moments, with a button prompt signaling when it's time to swap heroes.

Speaking of the story, it's one of the aspects we're most excited to dive into, given the exceptional narratives of the previous two games.


© Marvel

As expected, Insomniac promises Spider-Man 2 will dive into Peter's relationship with his sentient suit and how its malevolent influence will impact not only himself but the people closest to him. We saw glimpses of this in the demo, with Miles becoming increasingly unsettled by his mentor's darker attitude. Unfortunately, Marvel's Spider-Man 2 continues to leave us hanging regarding a specific release date, but it looks like we're in for a spectacular adventure this fall. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER Insomniac Games **RELEASE** October 20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AVATAR: FRONTIERS OF PANDORA

Becoming one with nature – and guns

Since the reveal of Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora in 2021, I've been curious how The Division developer Ubisoft Massive would take on this property – one of the most financially successful movie franchises in the world – and translate it into a video game. Knowing Ubisoft's pedigree, I imagined what Frontiers of Pandora might look like: something between Assassin's Creed and Far Cry. After a special behind-closed-doors presentation during Ubisoft's summer gaming event, I can say I was spot on.

Most interesting to me, instead of controlling an Avatar meant to resemble Pandora's native Na'vi, players control an actual Na'vi. As for how this ties into director James Cameron's movie universe, your Na'vi, which you customize in a player creator, is kidnapped as a child in the year 2138 by The Ambassador Program, a subset of the villainous Resources Development Administration from both Avatar movies.

Instead of living as intended, The Ambassador Program trains your Na'vi in human ways. But then the first movie's events happen, driving the RDA off Pandora. However, before abandoning ship, The Ambassador Program is ordered to kill all kidnapped Na'vi. Your teacher refuses, instead locking you away in cryosleep. You awaken 15 years later, finally ready to learn about your heritage and become one with Pandora, all while the RDA returns to try again to mine it for resources.

Mechanically, this story setup means you use Na'vi weapons, like long and short bows and spear throwers, and RDA weapons, like assault rifles and rocket launchers, all in first-person gameplay. Your first step on this new journey is to prove to your Na'vi tribe that you belong. That includes participating in the ceremonial trip to the Rookery, where you imprint on an Ikran, the flying mountain banshees of Pandora.

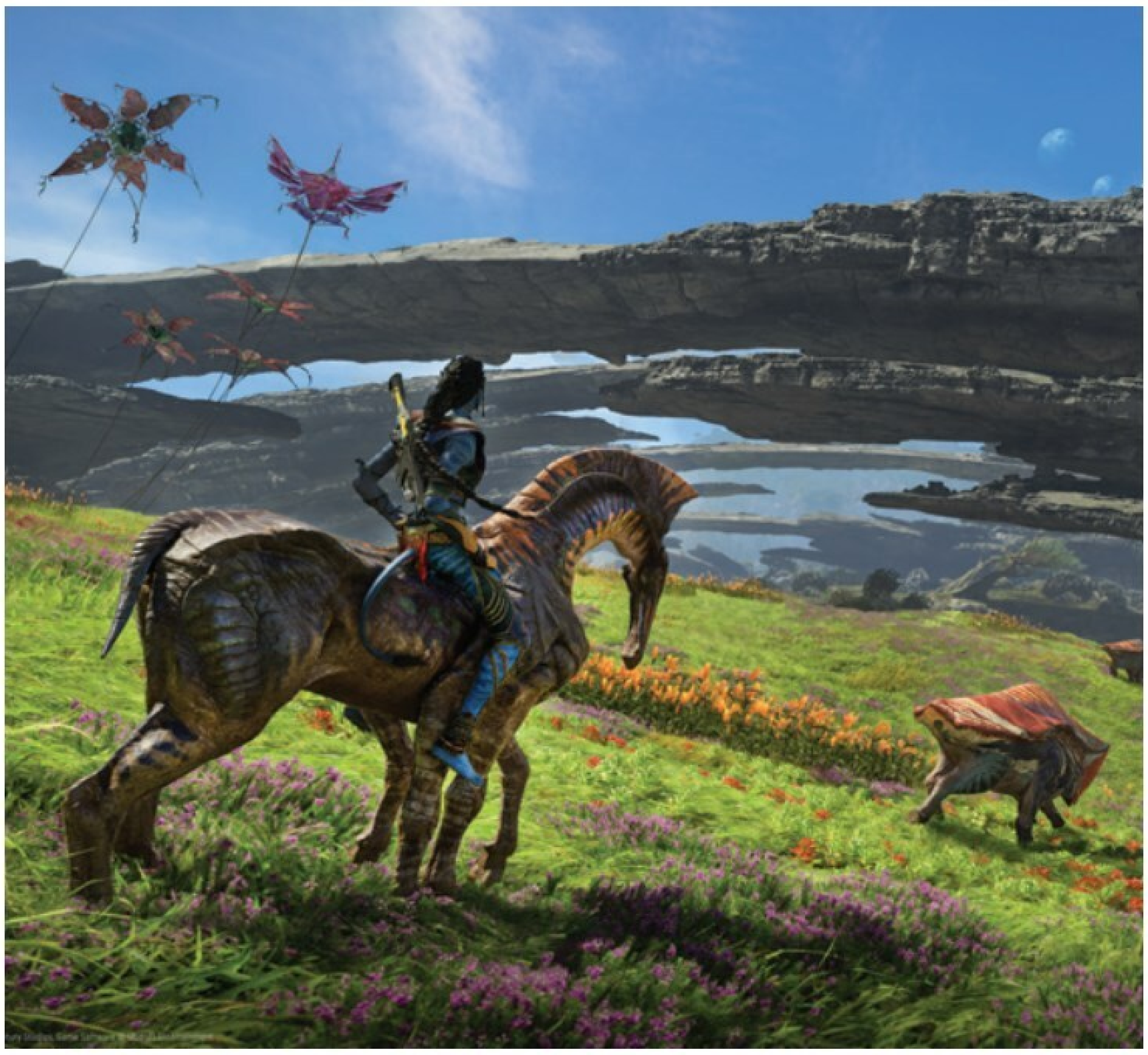
Game director Ditte Deenfeldt says you can customize your Ikran companion, from its head ornament to its color, as well as the flying streamers and riding attire. In this open-world version of Pandora, or more specifically, a brand-new region called the Western Frontier, we see a player ride a mount across a large open field, attack an RDA outpost, then hop on their Ikran and take to the skies, where they fly through the nooks and crannies of the towering (and sometimes floating) mountains of Pandora. There's aerial combat, too, so you can also take down RDA airships on the back of an Ikran.

Deenfeldt says taking down outposts, which in the brief gameplay snippets I saw reminded me most of the enemy-ridden miniature combative sandbox outposts in the Assassin's Creed series, will have an immediate effect on the surrounding lands of Pandora. These facilities pollute the areas they're in, and destroying them allows nature to reclaim them. That translates to new resources for you to collect, and it looks like nature will overtake the abandoned machinery of outposts, turning once mechanical monstrosities into havens for wildlife and fauna to thrive again. I'm especially excited to see fauna light up with bioluminescence at night, thanks to the game's day and night cycle.

You use resources you collect across the Western Frontier to craft new items, upgrade your current repertoire, and create new dishes to cook and eat for status effects and bonuses. All of this ties into the RPG nature of Frontiers Of Pandora, which includes ability trees to fill out alongside Na'vi customization that affects your head, waist, arms, and legs.

Visually, the game looks good but doesn't hold a candle to Cameron's movies; I'm not sure that's a realistic expectation to have, though. What matters most is the execution of gameplay, and though I didn't get to go hands-on with the game, the gameplay snippets I saw looked solid. Assassin's Creed and Far Cry fans will notice familiarities, but I want to see if controlling a towering, powerful 10-foot Na'vi makes another trip to Pandora worth the wait. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Shooter **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft
DEVELOPER Ubisoft Massive **RELEASE** December 7



MADDEN NFL 24

Moving the chains

Madden NFL 23 effectively pushed the ball downfield for EA Sports' long-running franchise. Though the implementation of the foundational FieldSense system, which revamped how the gameplay feels on both sides of the ball, was solid, much like any rookie, it was clear it still needed work to reach its full potential.

FieldSense evolves further in Madden NFL 24, with major improvements on both sides of the ball. A new contested-catch tackle system gives defenders more control when playing the receiver and ways to stop the dreaded high-throw strategy from last year's game. To contend with this, the offense gets new tools and improvements, with the biggest leap ahead addressing a longstanding problem with the Madden franchise: the receivers' loss of momentum after they catch a ball. Now, if you hit a receiver in stride, they won't bafflingly slow down as they did in prior games.

Those holding the ball aren't the only ones on the field, and blockers now spot and lock on to their targets earlier, allowing players to commit to their running lanes sooner. While playing, I noticed major improvements to the running lanes; I'm typically a pass-first player, but I found myself relying more heavily on the run game.

With Madden NFL 24, developer EA Tiburon aims to make the experience of playing each team feel different. New A.I. logic gives the CPU-controlled teams more knowledge on how to avoid incoming pressure, as well as better awareness of the down and distance, plus the skills of the receivers and defenders. This was all done in service to the single-player experience, giving each team a different feeling to play against.

Defenses also now react to repetitive play calls, meaning your third time running the same offensive play is less likely to be effective than the first time you ran it. However, perhaps the biggest improvement to defense comes from what the developer is taking away from their repertoire: their "psychic" abilities. In past games, defenders would magically swat away passes they weren't even looking at or preemptively run the receiver's route before the receiver himself ran it. Those A.I. anomalies are gone in this entry, making for more realistic defensive play.

A new gameplay emotion system aims to make big-play moments feel even bigger. As the development team puts it, they want the emotion you're feeling on the couch to be reflected by the players on the field. That means whether you score a crucial touchdown during a close game or a massive sack to force a fourth and long, you'll see noticeable differences in how the teams behave following a big play.

Many years after their disappearance, the popular minigames from previous iterations return full force in Madden NFL 24.

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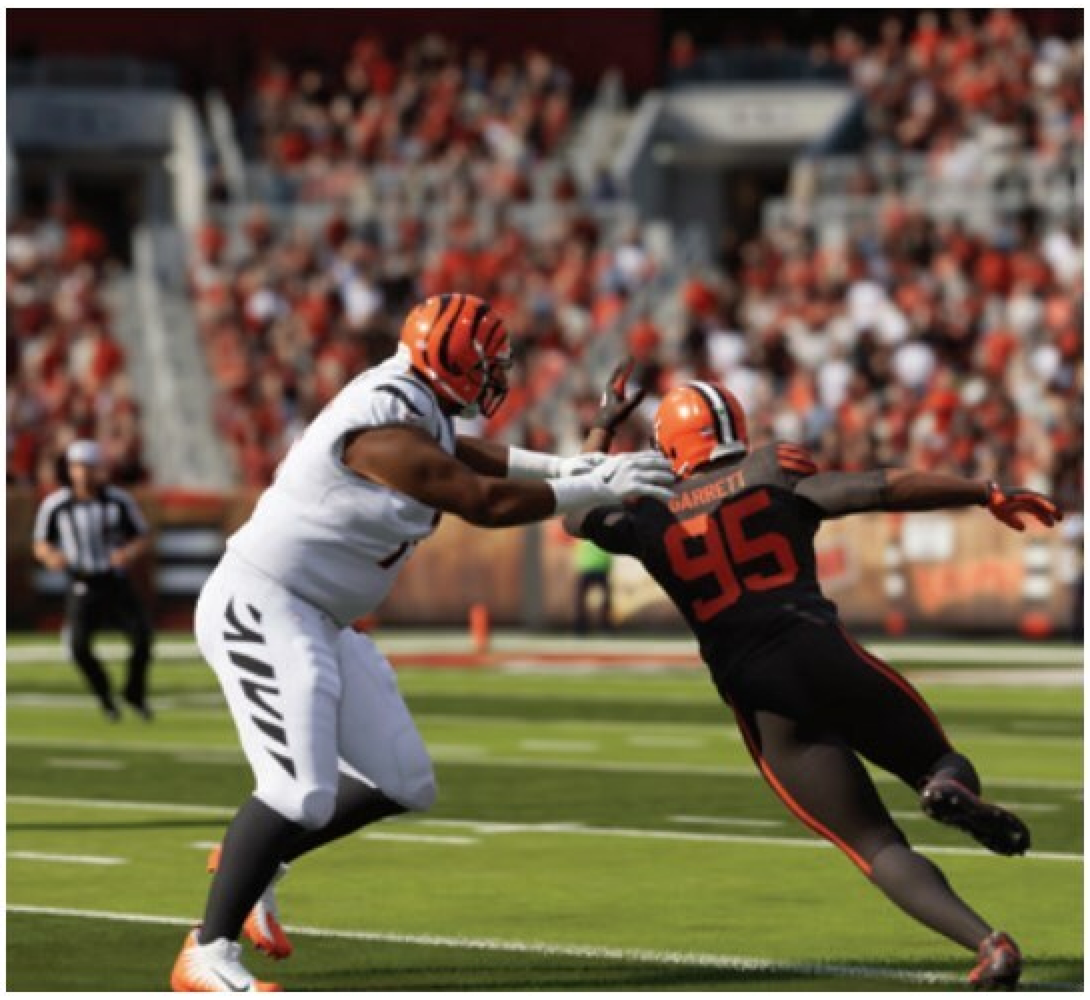


These games allow you to focus on specific areas of the game of football to try and achieve the highest score. At launch, Madden NFL 24 will feature at least 25 minigames, with more to come through the game's live-service roadmap.

Madden 24 continues the developers' renewed commitment to Franchise mode. The way players move from team to team continued to be a big focus for the developers this year, as GMs can now add six items on each side of a trade, and both the trade logic and offer logic have been overhauled. This feature stacks with what EA Tiburon calls Free Agency 2.0 to improve the front-office aspect of Madden NFL 24. When you're trying to figure out how you'll hang on to your favorite players, you'll notice enhanced contract restructuring options. The A.I. logic has also been reworked for restructuring and re-signing, meaning both users and CPU teams can hang on to their stars.

As Franchise continues to receive love from Tiburon, so too does the player-lock career mode. Madden NFL 24 signals the return of Superstar mode for the first time in nearly a decade, replacing Face of the Franchise. Once you're in the league, you'll notice improved feedback after each play and drive for each position. A new mission system also gives you side objectives to build your brand, team, and influence within the league. This user experience allows you to surface the storylines, progress, and rewards you want, to give you a more tailored experience within Superstar mode.

For the first time, players on PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, and PC can compete against each other with crossplay. PC is included in that list because, unlike last year, the PC release will reflect the feature set of the PS5 and Xbox Series X/S versions of the game. While Tiburon has no plans to expand to Ultimate Team in the future, as senior producer Mike Mahar puts it, the question of when Franchise mode will feature crossplay will be "when," not "if."

In the short time I spent playing Madden NFL 24 at EA Tiburon, and the extended time I spent speaking with and learning from the developers, this year's game looks and feels great. However, the proof will ultimately come when the larger community puts the title through its paces, and we all get to see where this game shines and where it falls short of the marker. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Sports (6-Player Online)
PUBLISHER EA Sports **DEVELOPER** EA Tiburon **RELEASE** August 18

MORTAL KOMBAT 1

The hot tag

Mortal Kombat 11's time-traveling campaign concludes in jaw-dropping fashion. Series hero Liu Kang defeats the time goddess Kronika, taking her power and becoming an all-powerful fire god. His first divine act: reset the fiction's tumultuous timeline, creating a new reality devoid of conflict and defined by peace. But the more things change, the more they stay the same, as bloody conflict rears its head again with many more about to be torn from their shoulders.

As Earthrealm's new protector, Liu Kang is assembling champions to face a yet-to-be-defined threat. Mortal Kombat 1 features reimagined versions of iconic Kombatants. Sub-Zero and Scorpion are now brothers, Raiden is a (still electrifying) human monk, Mileena's Tarkatan maw appears to result from a mysterious disease, and Johnny Cage...is still a charismatic showboat. Some things never change.

The new Kameo fighter system juxtaposes old and new versions of these revamped characters by letting each summon their classic versions for tag-team style assists. This unique roster of fighters includes the original MK 1 and 2 versions of Sonya Blade, Jax, and Kano, among others.

"We really love the novelty of it," said NetherRealm Studios head Ed Boon during a stage demo at Summer Game Fest. "We really want the Kameo characters to feel [like a] kind of nod to the old games."

Summoning the aid of a Kameo fighter is as simple as pressing a shoulder button, bringing them in to unleash a surprise attack. Combining this summoning button with a directional input unleashes different attacks for each Kameo fighter, including moves such as Kano firing his signature eye-laser or Sonya grabbing opponents with her legs. Kameo assaults are suitable for disrupting your opponent's offensive flurry, can deflect attacks in some instances, and be incorporated into your moves and combos, essentially letting you combine two different move sets into one. Fatal Blows are the flashiest and most brutal example of this tandem dynamic, with both characters taking turns eviscerating a victim with bone-shattering X-ray moves. However, Kameo summons operate on a cooldown, engendering strategic use.

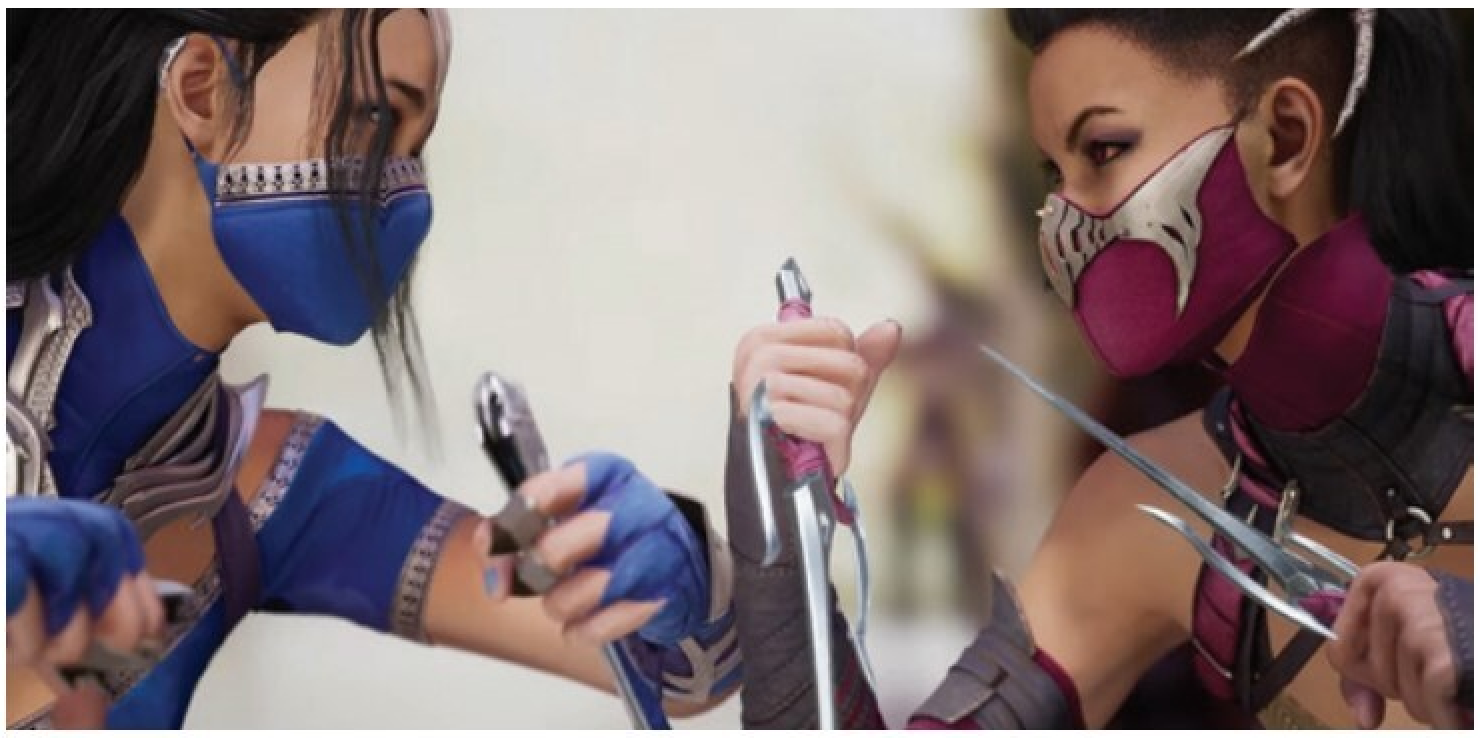
Fatalities remain a bloody disgusting treat and have a nostalgic edge since Kameo fighters join in on the bloodshed. These sidekicks can spill blood 1990s-style; Kano rips the still-beating hearts from opponents' chests, Sonya blows her deadly kiss, and Jax once again assumes his inexplicable giant form to crush fighters under his boot. Of course, the main roster pulls its weight with a bevy of new fatalities, such as Kenshi telekinetically shoving his katana down a fighter's throat to scramble their insides.

Mortal Kombat 1 features a new cinematic story campaign, and NetherRealm plans to reveal the game's other features and characters over the summer. While rumors have circulated regarding the appearance of non-MK guest characters, actor Jean-Claude Van Damme, whose film *Bloodsport* was a primary inspiration for the franchise, will appear as a premium skin for the character he unwittingly spawned: Johnny Cage. Not only will Cage sport the "Muscles from Brussels" likeness, but Van Damme even lends his voice to the character.

Fire-God Liu Kang has crafted a fascinating universe with Mortal Kombat 1, and we can't wait to learn more about it as we march toward its September 19 release.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1 to 2-Player Fighting
PUBLISHER Warner Bros. Games **DEVELOPER** NetherRealm Studios **RELEASE** September 19



CYBERPUNK 2077: PHANTOM LIBERTY

It's good to be back

Despite an extremely rocky launch, I enjoyed Cyberpunk 2077 a lot. I beat it around its release in 2020, and I've checked in a few times to see how CD Projekt Red's post-launch work has improved the game, but those check-ins were always a few hours. I'd drive around, shoot some enemies, and listen to Run The Jewels on the in-game radio. Satisfied with my V's ending, I didn't have an excuse to return to the meat of the campaign. But when CDPR announced its Phantom Liberty expansion, I knew it'd be the reason I needed to dive back in fully.

I played an hour of the expansion – what appears to be its opening hour – and I'm happy to say it's good to be back in Night City. Or, more specifically, the city's Pacifica district, because Phantom Liberty introduces the new Dogtown area into the game. Pacifica was set to be a resort district of sorts, complete with bustling casinos and the like, but the Unification War prevented that idea from being realized. Part of that became what's known as Dogtown, the starting location for this new expansion.

It's a run-down area, littered with remnants of what could have been something like a massive pyramid building reminiscent of Las Vegas' Luxor Hotel. CDPR tells me that while Phantom Liberty begins in Dogtown, the narrative will take players all across Night City.

CDPR has positioned Phantom Liberty as a spy thriller, injecting espionage into the base game's otherwise action-heavy story. And right from the jump, that's clear. Netrunner Songbird speaks directly to V, telling her she can cure her of the ticking time bomb that is the Relic program in her head, aka Keanu Reeves' Johnny Silverhand.

But first, she needs to save none other than the President of the New United States, Rosalind Myers, who is aboard Space Force One, which will crash land in Dogtown at any moment. This sets up the story of Phantom Liberty – V heads to the crashed ship, saves President Myers, and the two hide out in an abandoned high-rise building. It's the kind of bombastic opening I want to welcome me back to this world.

V's ultimate objective is to get Myers out of Dogtown, but that's nearly impossible because there are targets everywhere on her and likely massive bounties to take her out, she says. Getting out of Dogtown, then Night City, and returning to Washington will be impossible unless Solomon Reed can help. That's Idris Elba's character, and he's essentially a Sleeper Agent that used to work with Myers, and she's confident he's her ticket out. So, V's job is to find Reed so they can perform a reverse heist to get Myers somewhere safe.

I won't spoil his arrival, but Elba plays the role well; he's a hardened spy and seemingly a man of few words, at least compared to Johnny Silverhand. The two are complete opposites, and it's a fun contrast to watch V deal with them in my short time when V, Johnny Silverhand, and Reed are together.

I dabbled in some street combat, and it feels familiar. CDPR says a free update coming to the base game alongside this expansion brings new vehicular combat mechanics, like shooting out of your vehicle or firing missiles and bullets out of your car. I didn't experience this, but I'm intrigued to see how it fits into combat in the rest of the game and its expansion.

I left Phantom Liberty excited to play more. It feels like a return to the seedy home of Night City I enjoyed in 2077 and promises to bring a new type of story to this world. With just an hour of hands-on time, I can't say Phantom Liberty feels or looks all that different. But I'm not sure it's meant to. It's the narrative of this expansion I expect will set it apart from the base game. What I played set up that narrative nicely, but I honestly have no idea where it could go. I'm excited to find out. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** CD Projekt Red
DEVELOPER CD Projekt Red **RELEASE** September 26

METAL GEAR SOLID DELTA: SNAKE EATER

What a thrill

The long-rumored remake of Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater was recently finally confirmed with a teaser trailer. The footage, which is not gameplay as Konami made clear, showed animals like ants, frogs, birds, alligators, and, appropriately, snakes fighting in a swamp before a shadowy figure emerged, revealing itself to be Naked Snake (or Big Boss, as he will later be known) creeping through the woods.

That exciting teaser did little to reveal additional details beyond confirming that the game exists, but a few subsequent updates shared how this remake of the classic 2004 PlayStation 2 game will work. For one, Konami has confirmed the original voice cast is returning, which means David Hayter should be taking back the Snake/Big Boss role from Kiefer Sutherland, who performed the character in Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain.

Konami is vague regarding how this remake's gameplay will function but has stated it "will faithfully reproduce the story and game design of MGS3, whilst adding new elements too." It also explained why it is calling the game Delta (stylized as Δ for the official logo), saying, "The Delta symbol was chosen because its meaning fits the concept of the remake project. Delta means 'change' or 'difference' without changing structure."

Metal Gear's creator, Hideo Kojima, appears to have no involvement in this remake, which isn't surprising considering his split from Konami was acrimonious by most accounts. It raises some concerns, considering the Metal Gear games have always been surprisingly personal and closely tied to his artistic intentions. However, to see the franchise make a return – even in the form of a remake without its original creator – is still an exciting prospect. The last time we played a new Metal Gear game was in 2018 with the underwhelming, but admittedly interesting, Metal Gear Survive.

I look forward to seeing how much the remake will evolve the game. Will the camera move behind Snake's shoulder as it is in subsequent Metal Gear Solid entries? Or will we still see the action mostly from overhead as in the original game? Will Ape Escape monkeys still be involved? Does Donald "Sigint" Anderson still share the details of his horrifying dream? How tall will that one ladder be? We have dozens of questions and can't wait to learn more. For its part, Konami says, "We are working hard for Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater to be a faithful recreation of the original story and game design, while evolving the gameplay with stunning visuals and a seamless user experience."

BY KYLE HILLIARD

KEPT YOU WAITING, HUH?

Alongside a remake of Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater, Konami also announced plans for Metal Gear Solid: Master Collection Volume 1 for PlayStation 5, releasing in Autumn 2023. Konami said to stay tuned for future announcements when asked about other platforms. The collection will include ports of Metal Gear Solid and the HD Collection versions of Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty and Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater. The original Metal Gear and Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake will also be part of the package. The Volume 1 title implies future additional volumes are in the works.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Konami **DEVELOPER** Konami **RELEASE** TBD

REMNANT II

Growing in the right direction

Remnant: From The Ashes entered the looter-shooter space in 2019, defining its core loop with procedurally-segmented levels and Dark Souls-inspired mechanics like a stamina-based dodge roll and limited-use health consumables. Remnant's fresh take on the shooter genre attracted praise, including *Game Informer*'s review, which states, "Strong systems and a satisfying gameplay loop give Remnant: From The Ashes a powerful foundation, even if the experience is mired by repetitive and uninteresting bosses and environments."

While it remains to be known whether the sequel's procedural levels will still be interesting after several hours of play (the environments I explored at Summer Game Fest didn't necessarily blow me away) developer Gunfire Games includes several notable improvements in Remnant II. The most prominent addition is an expanded archetype system featuring at least four classes: The Gunslinger, which offers the most familiar gameplay for returning players; The Handler, a supporting character who controls a pet dog; The Hunter, who specializes in sniper-focused strategies and critical hits; and The Challenger, the brutish archetype I chose to play for its heavy sword, shotgun, and "Warstomp" ability, which staggers enemies in a cone-shaped area of effect. While we don't know the full details, Gearbox Publishing tells us "multiple archetypes can be unlocked during play, leveled up, and equipped together for a variety of playstyles."

Rifles, pistols, and shotguns offer various screen shake intensity and damage output levels, making most of Remnant II's weapons empowering. Each piece of equipment changes the look of your character – a requirement for any great loot-based game – and fits the series' dark-fantasy look well, with worn pieces of metal, patinated leather, and glowing elements adorning the characters. I discovered many stylish items throughout my play session, and I can already imagine how I want to customize my Challenger in the full release.

The first game's tree-like enemies, collectively known as The Root, return in Remnant II. This time, the invasive species introduces new variants, with serpentine plants and hooded archers that vanish after firing arrows at you. Basic enemies like the Root Nemesis and Root Flyer return, adding more volume to the hordes you face while exploring. Notably, Gunfire Games seems to be reworking its approach to boss designs, relying less on enemy waves and focusing more on distinct set-pieces, which is very exciting.

Other quality-of-life improvements, like a new 3D map with tilt and pan controls, have made their way into this release. This addition contextualizes environments well and features a legend to quickly grasp what any map icon means. Additionally, a new inspection option allows you to rotate and get a closer look at the surface details of any item.

I'm eager to play Remnant II, especially after experiencing co-op play in my recent hands-on session, but I'm unsure how the sequel will compete in such a saturated market. After all, loot-based games – even single-player ones – are more prominent now than when the series materialized in 2019. Still, I'm hopeful Gunfire Games' unique visual style, procedural level design, and exciting combat expertise will deliver a worthwhile action experience when Remnant II releases in the coming weeks. **BY ALEX VAN AKEN**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter (3-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Gunfire Games **DEVELOPER** Gearbox Publishing **RELEASE** July 25

SONIC SUPERSTARS

Back to basics

During the Summer Game Fest presentation, Sonic Team revealed a modern take on the classic Sonic the Hedgehog franchise. Sonic Superstars brings the classic 2D gameplay that originally put Sega's most iconic franchise on the map and adds a ton of features and a beautiful modern art style to make for an all-new adventure.

Though Sonic is the star, there are plenty of supporting cast members. Tails, Knuckles, and Amy also appear as playable characters, each with their own unique abilities. Tails can fly, Knuckles can glide and climb, and Amy can use her hammer to double jump and smash enemies. It's no coincidence that this game has four playable characters, as Sonic Superstars offers four-player co-op.

Sega also announced that Naoto Ohshima, the original designer of Sonic the Hedgehog and Dr. Eggman returns after being away from the series since Sonic Adventure 1. Ohshima is not only helping with designing the game but also creating a completely new character.

I had the choice to play through Bridge Island Zone or Speed Jungle Zone, which I'm led to believe are the first two zones of the game. If the concept of a modernized 2D Sonic game gives you pause thanks to the poor physics and momentum of Sonic the Hedgehog 4 or the floaty, imprecise 2D platforming found in many modern Sonic games, you can rest easy. Sonic Superstars veers closer to the Sonic Mania end of the spectrum, giving off a feel of picking up momentum that is loyal to the classic 2D entries in the series.

Speeding through Bridge Island's two Acts feels familiar and intuitive, and not just because the zone feels like a combination of Green Hill and Emerald Hill from Sonic 1 and 2, respectively. Branching paths give you several ways through each stage, and discoveries like giant rings that let you take part in a 3D swinging minigame to retrieve a Chaos Emerald encourage you to explore each part of every Act. The Special Stages drop you into a 3D space with bubbles around you and a Chaos Emerald in the distance. As Sonic falls, he locks on to the bubbles and can swing from them to catapult himself toward the Chaos Emerald. If you can successfully complete the chase without falling or running out of time, you're rewarded with the precious gem.

Each new Chaos Emerald you retrieve grants you an Emerald Power, of which there are seven. This first one rewards me with Avatar, an ability that sends clones of your character across the screen to destroy enemies and clear a path. I ended up using it on the boss of Bridge Island Zone's second Act to great effect; Dr. Eggman had no idea what hit him.

I also tried Speed Jungle, which adds giant vines to grind on and smaller vines that send you flying upward. The boss of Act 1 is a harpoon-shooting mosquito that you need to spin dash up a rope to damage, while the boss of Act 2 is essentially the giant spherical robot from *The Incredibles*, where you can't damage it but instead need to goad it into penetrating its own body with its spiky arms.

I really enjoyed my time with Sonic Superstars. My initial assessment upon seeing the gameplay featured in yesterday's trailer was that it would basically give us Sega's version of Nintendo's New Super Mario Bros. series, but Sonic Superstars not only feels good, it feels bold and novel in a way the New Super Mario Bros. series doesn't anymore, all while feeling like a strong continuation of the original 2D Sonic games. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Platforming **PUBLISHER** Sega **DEVELOPER** Sonic Team, Arzest **RELEASE** Fall

VIEWFINDER

Seeing is believing

Viewfinder is a first-person puzzle game inspired by a single mechanic: what if you could walk into a picture? In the brief bits of gameplay I had seen before, it certainly looked like a neat trick but left me curious as to whether it would hold up over an entire playthrough. Over my 90 minutes of gameplay, my cynicism was dispelled. Developer Sad Owl Studios manages to evolve and iterate on Viewfinder's core concept in increasingly clever ways while maintaining a difficulty level that's just high enough to keep me entertained and push the story forward.

Viewfinder starts by dropping you right into the first puzzle. By finding photos scattered around the map, you can hold them up in front of you and place them into the landscape, replacing the existing world. If there's a wall blocking your way, you can place a doorway to walk through it. If there's a gap too far to jump across, place a bridge. It's a feature that's shockingly intuitive, and I rarely had trouble getting the photos to do what I wanted. If you mess up, holding a button to rewind time and undo your placement is simple.

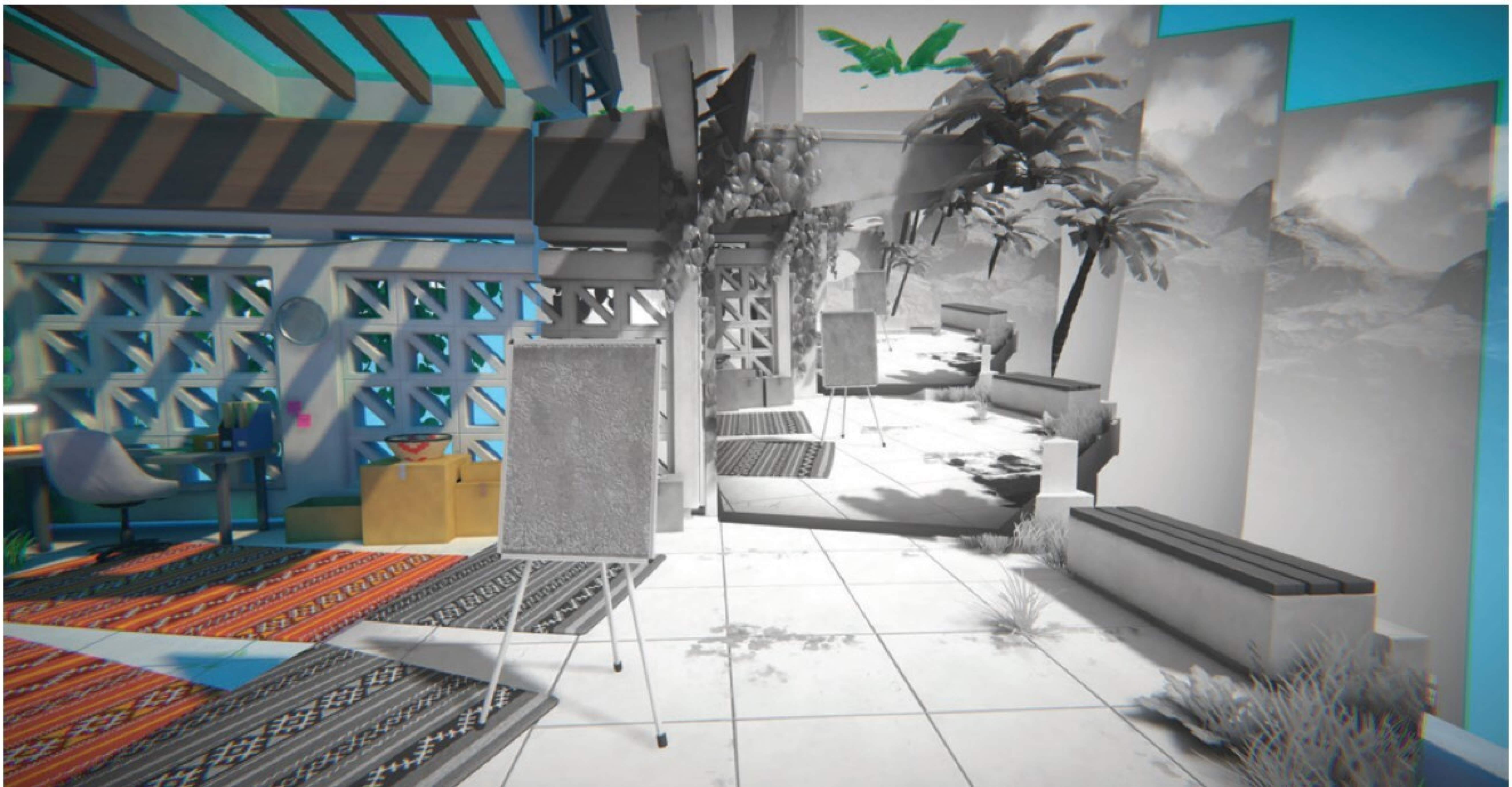
This photo-placing mechanic could get old quickly, but Viewfinder introduces new variables often enough that puzzles never feel stale. For example, normally, you have to find images in the environment, but introducing cameras takes the game to the next level. Photos can be used to duplicate items and reach parts of the level previously unseen. In one instance, I took a picture of a wall, placed it in front of me in an open space, and then walked to the other side of the wall to find an item on its backside. That's just the tip of the iceberg. Perspective puzzles, color panels, and battery-powered devices add exciting wrinkles to the formula. The more variables Viewfinder introduces, the smarter you feel and the more satisfying its levels are to complete.

A lot of the joy I felt with this game is thanks to the art team. Not all the images you place are photos – I placed drawings, video game screenshots, and a birthday card – and Sad Owl captures each new image in charming, distinct art styles. One of my favorites is a crayon drawing of a house from early in the game, which manifests as a boxy papercraft you can walk into. Several of these unique images with alternate art styles aren't even needed to complete their respective levels, which made me appreciate them even more. They're cute, personal details that provide a level of charm that helps lift the game's tone.

One of Viewfinder's most interesting aspects is its world-building, and I was surprised by its direction. I enjoyed listening to voice memos scattered around each level. It kept my attention focused on the game, in the same way listening to a podcast makes doing chores around the house more enjoyable. On top of that, its narrative mystery fits in well with the puzzles players face during gameplay, and I'm curious to see where it goes next.

In many ways, Viewfinder is hiding more than meets the eye. The hour and a half I played was an encouraging start to one of the most unique, visually striking puzzle games I've played in years. That Sad Owl Studios has managed to get so much mileage out of a simple photo-placing mechanic is a testament to Viewfinder's ability to innovate – an ability I hope has even more space to flesh out in the full release. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Puzzle **PUBLISHER** Thunderful Publishing
DEVELOPER Sad Owl Studios **RELEASE** 2023



ALONE IN THE DARK

A forefather of survival horror returns

Before Resident Evil and Silent Hill, 1992's Alone in the Dark helped lay the foundation for 3D survival horror before the genre even had a name. Players explored a haunted building laden with elaborate puzzles and scary monsters, with gameplay emphasizing thoughtful management of scarce resources. It even featured two playable characters with separate scenarios, an idea later adopted by Resident Evil 2. Numerous sequels of varying quality followed, but it's been many years since the series was culturally relevant. Developer Pieces Interactive plans to change this by returning to the celebrated first game and reimagining it for a modern audience.

This new vision of Alone in the Dark largely sticks to the blueprint of the 1992 game. After receiving a disturbing letter from her uncle, Jeremy Hartwood, Emily Hartwood enlists the aid of hardboiled Detective Edward Carnby to figure out what happened to him. They visit the haunted Dercerto countryside hospital, where Jeremy checked himself in after claiming to be plagued by an evil entity called the Dark Man. Emily is also grappling with a mysterious family affliction known as The Hartwood Curse, and their visit soon spirals into a fight for their sanity and lives. Pieces is going all-in on this remake by enlisting actors Jodie Comer (*Killing Eve*, *Free Guy*) and David Harbour (*Violent Night*, *Stranger Things*) to lend their voices and likenesses to Emily and Edward, respectively.

Like the original, Alone in the Dark has a separate campaign for each protagonist, and though the story has the same setup, events unfold differently. People behave differently around each character, and each also visits exclusive areas, encouraging players to experience the game twice to see everything. Fans should expect new twists on the original tale alongside copious references and Easter eggs.

As you explore Dercerto and beyond, you are assaulted by all manner of supernatural monsters, from strange insect-like critters to grotesque humanoid creatures made from vines. You can blast them apart with firearms, but ammo is limited, so you must pick your battles and wisely use your resources and the environment. That means relying on melee weapons, hurling stray objects, and triggering surrounding hazards such as shooting gas pools to ignite enemies into flames. Alone in the Dark also places heavy emphasis on puzzle-solving. Dercerto is laden with strange contraptions and riddles, and you'll need to wear your detective hat to find clues pointing you in the right direction.

Alone in the Dark arrives in time for Halloween on October 25, but you can get a taste of what's to come by playing a free downloadable prequel chapter now called Grace In The Dark, which is inspired by Alone in the Dark 2's Jack in the Dark prologue game. Grace in the Dark stars a character named Grace Saunders exploring Dercerto weeks before the main game begins. With Resident Evil helping usher in a survival horror renaissance with quality new titles and Silent Hill making a comeback, now's as good a time as any for Alone in the Dark to awaken from hibernation. We just hope Pieces Interactive can recapture the game's magic and remind players why the series was once so highly regarded among horror fans. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Adventure **PUBLISHER** THQ Nordic **DEVELOPER** Pieces Interactive **RELEASE** October 25

STEAMWORLD BUILD

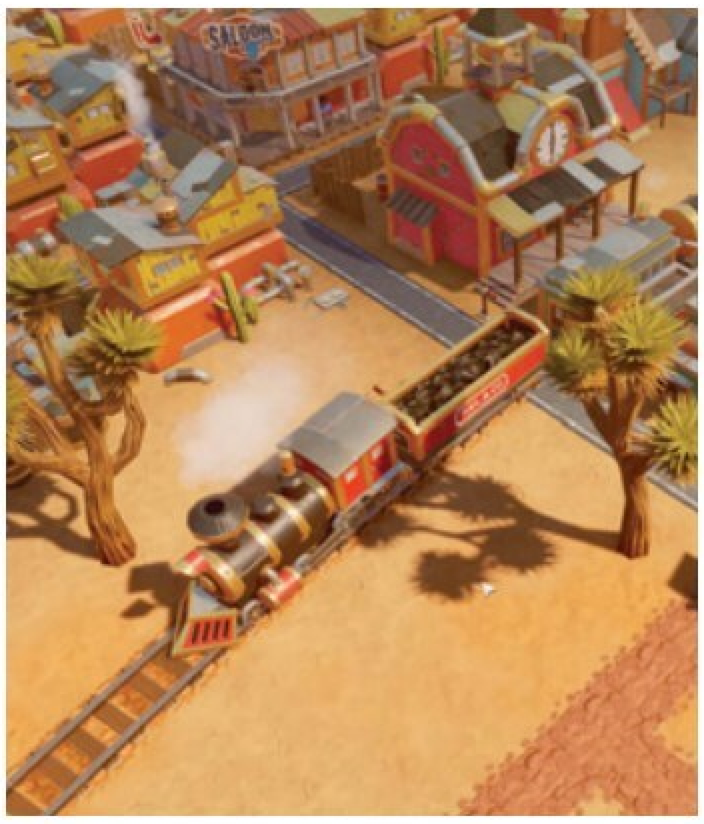
Building a strong foundation

The SteamWorld franchise is perhaps the biggest shapeshifter in video games. We've seen it take the form of a tower defense title, Metroid-style action platformers, turn-based strategy, and a deck-building RPG. Most impressively, all those games have been pretty good to great. Now the series has its sights on the city-building scene with SteamWorld Build, and based on what we've played, it could be a quality spin on the genre.

SteamWorld Build tasks players with raising a flourishing town on a dying planet. The goal: locate and excavate pieces of a rocket to build a vessel and escape this world before it collapses. Building the required tools means creating workers by raising houses and factories to harvest wood, metal, and other resources. Planning the city is snappy and intuitive; it didn't take long to get a basic pipeline of tasks going. A fun strategy comes through in equipping buildings with various cards that bestow perks like reducing the required number of workers or adding taxes to increase cash flow.

The second half of the experience unfolds in an underground mine. Commanding miners and other units to dig up valuable ores while unlocking new areas (and managing the stability of the mine itself) adds a fun layer that feeds nicely into the action above ground. Water sources, for example, can only be tapped underground, forcing me to smartly layout assembly lines to efficiently deliver needed subterranean goods to factories, warehouses, and stores.

SteamWorld Build's various missions and milestones – coupled with a narrative sporting the series' trademark humor – add tangible hooks for those wanting to accomplish more than building an aesthetically pleasing city. So far, the experience is an enjoyable and strategic city-builder that strikes a nice balance of being laid back and mentally engrossing. **BY MARCUS STEWART**



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER Thunderful Publishing **DEVELOPER** Thunderful Development **RELEASE** 2023

Little Friends Puppy Island
Miasma Chronicles
Beholder 3
Cozy Grove
Goodbye World
ALSO AVAILABLE FOR PS5
ALSO AVAILABLE FOR PS5 PS4
ALSO AVAILABLE FOR Nintendo Switch
ALSO AVAILABLE FOR PS5 PS4
GAMING GEMS COMING SOON!
GET 'EM AT GameStop
POWER TO THE PLAYERS
EVERYONE to MATURE 17+ E-M ESRB esrb.org

ALAN WAKE 2

Return of the writer

The 13-year road to Alan Wake 2 was full of speed bumps as developer Remedy Entertainment dealt with publishing rights and finding the right ideas. I had a chance to sit through an extended live demo of the long-awaited sequel and speak with the directors to learn more.

The game universe has progressed in real-time, taking place 13 years after the first game. Alan Wake 2 utilizes a dual-protagonist system, introducing Saga Anderson. Alan Wake has been trapped in the Dark Place, a nightmarish version of New York City, ever since the events of the first game. While there, Alan attempts to rewrite his reality and escape this alternate dimension. His story centers on Saga, an FBI agent investigating several murders in the Pacific Northwest.

My demo also centers on Saga and her partner Casey as they follow the trail of a killer. The two go through a beautiful forest, but it won't be a pleasant stroll for long. Saga is looking into the Cult of the Tree, so naturally, she investigates a tree deep in the woods. One name keeps coming up: Nightingale. By shining her flashlight on a spot in the tree that's shrouded by darkness, she dispels the darkness covering up her next clue and learns she needs to go to a witch's hut before seeking out something called the tattooed heart.

But first, it's time to take a coffee break... kind of. When you find a thermos, you can save your game or, in later phases of the story, switch between playing as Saga or Alan.

After saving the game, Remedy gives us a look at the Mind Place, a physical representation of Saga's thought processes. This construct is essentially a 3D, interactive menu for the investigation at hand. It features a case board to organize clues to progress the investigation, profiling options to learn more about suspects, and even ways to upgrade weapons. The Mind Place is exclusive to Saga, but Remedy teases Alan has an area that functions similarly.

"We wanted to build on [Remedy's history with giving players power] and give the player more verbiage connected to the power fantasy of being an FBI profiler or tortured writer," co-director Kyle Rowley says. "Trying to build mechanics that allow us to pace the game better and give the player more things to do."

Saga arrives at a convenience store, only to find a massive monster inside. Using the flashlight to expose its weakness, she blasts it away. Combat is more methodical and strategic this time, but it's still often about using your light to disperse darkness. In one sequence, Saga hides under a spotlight, and the monster loses sight of her. After defeating the enemy, Saga finds the tattooed heart in a fridge. She also finds a shotgun. Inventory management in Alan Wake 2 takes inspiration from the Resident Evil series, which is understandably exciting for survival-horror fans.

The words tattooed on the heart instruct her how to reach The Overlap, a place where her reality seemingly shares space with the Dark Place. Saga returns to the tree from before, and by following the instructions,

Oh Deer
DINER
Bright Falls 81st
DEERFEST
WELCOME
DEERFE
FBI

reaches The Overlap. It looks like the forest Saga was wandering around before, but something's a little off.

Images of a city superimpose over wooded landscapes, unsettling red lighting illuminates the trees, and the gruesome face of Nightingale keeps popping up in front of the screen, creating a massive jump-scare.

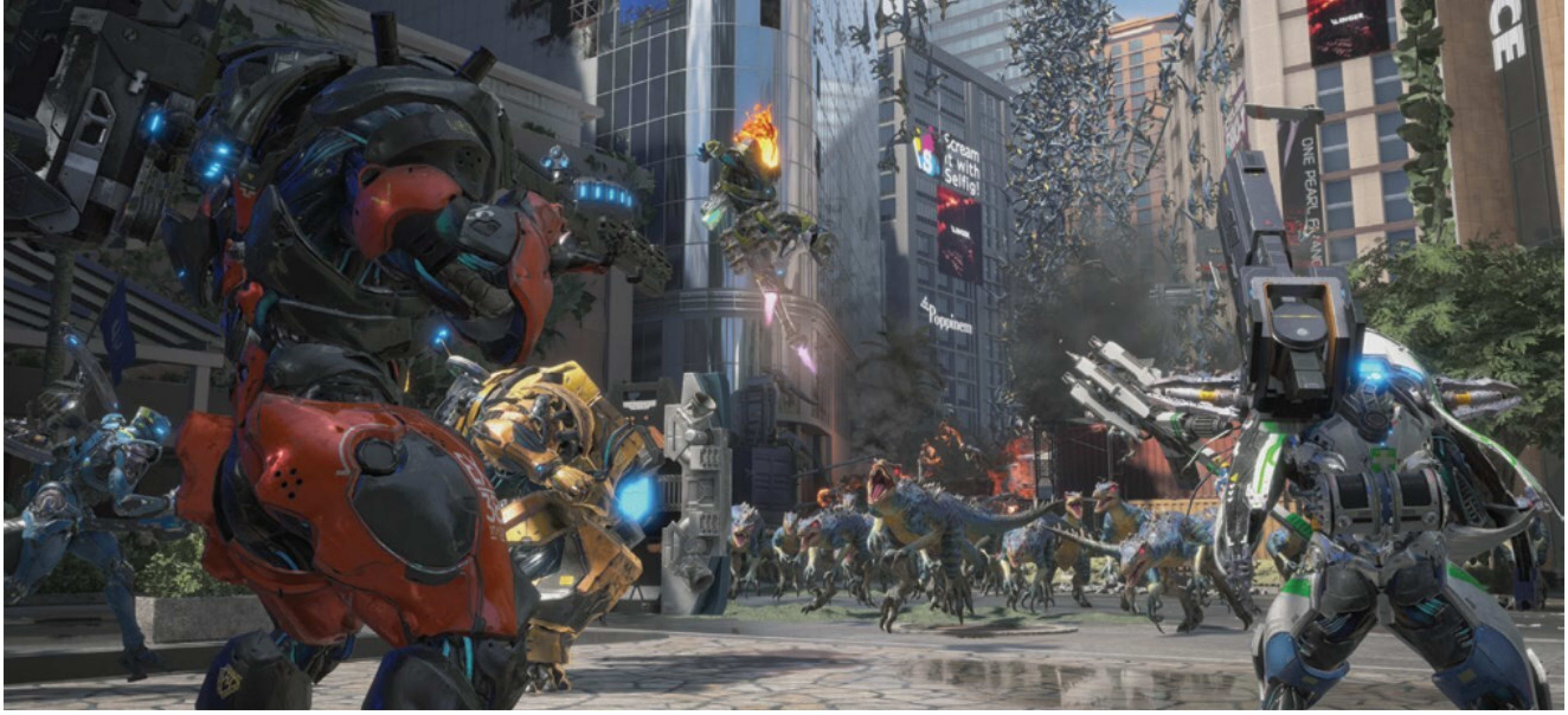
At long last, Saga reaches Nightingale. The supernatural killer is overpowering, and Saga needs to be strategic to stand a chance. After unloading her pistol and shotgun into him, she runs through the woods to buy time. I don't want to share too many details about the battle or how it ends, but the demo concludes with Saga stumbling over to a lake, where a mysterious man has washed up on shore. She asks him who he is, and he says, "My name is Alan Wake. I'm a writer."

Alan Wake 2's visual fidelity, atmospheric tension, and combat all look fantastic. And now, with the 13-year wait poised to end, Remedy is excited for fans to get their hands on the game.

"Creating this, it's so much work; it's hard work, so I'm feeling exhausted," Remedy creative director Sam Lake says. "But at the same time, it's so exciting! This has been a dream. This has been fiction for so long, and now having it manifest for real, it's exciting and thrilling, and I honestly like the way I'm feeling and how proud I am feeling, and how excited I am feeling about having been able to do this and what kind of crazy ideas we have put inside this and getting it made. I feel more excited than I have ever felt on any game project along the way."

After seeing Alan Wake 2 action, I'm inclined to share in Sam Lake's excitement. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Epic Games
DEVELOPER Remedy Entertainment
RELEASE October 17



EXOPRIMAL

Long-term storytelling

Exoprimal's time-traveling, dinosaur-blasting premise firmly positions it as one of the strangest multiplayer shooters on the horizon. Players have gotten to sample its strangeness in a previous open beta, but a recent preview gave me a chance to peek into the game's storytelling structure and customization.

As a quick primer, Exoprimal tasks you and four other friends to team up and battle waves of invading dinosaurs. Outfitted in specialized exosuits, you blast apart velociraptors, triceratops, and mighty T-Rexes in a race to finish missions before a rival squad of players completes the same tasks. Similar to Overwatch, exosuits promote specific roles and playstyles, such as various attackers, tanks, and healers. My favorite became the Zepher, a swift, melee-focused suit wielding a sword. Players can swap suits anytime, allowing teams to shift strategies to adapt to changing objectives. In addition to facing the extinct predators, missions also put you in direct conflict with the other team, leading to firefights aimed at sabotaging each others' progress.

The action is wild, and the plot isn't too far behind. The story follows a small band of soldiers from the year 2040. You control a custom-made avatar helping your squad leader, the tough yet jovial Lorenzo, and your teammates: Alders, the sassy brains of the operation, Majesty, a no-nonsense fighter, and Sandy, the crew's robotic helper. The cheesy banter, humor, and overall B-movie vibe gives me strong Binary Domain vibes; Exoprimal knows it's silly and doesn't pretend to be anything else.

Cutscenes occur between multiplayer matches (there's no traditional single-player campaign) and gradually tell a time-traveling plot in which our team finds themselves transported a few years into a future parallel reality where they encounter alternate versions of themselves. The only way to see how they stop the dinos and save Earth is by completing matches, which unlock new scenes in a web called the Analysis Map. This large flow chart contains individual story cinematics beginning in a circular outer rim that, when unlocked, opens connected scenes that weave towards what appears to be a finale at the center. Although I managed to unlock several scenes in a row after just a few rounds, the nodes are numerous enough to suggest you need to spend hours playing matches to see how this wacky adventure concludes.

I also explored the Hangar, where you can customize exosuits with new Modules and cosmetic skins. Modules are purchased with in-game currency upon meeting level requirements and can increase health, augment abilities and alter their performance. You can equip up to three, with each slot holding a specific type. Slot 1 holds Suit Modules, and Slots 2 and 3 hold combat-focused Action Modules. More generalized Base Modules fit into any slot, such as one that raises speed at critically low health. These effects are upgraded by spending more currency, and you can equip the same Module across multiple exosuits. You can further customize a suit by equipping a Rig, a piece of equipment that adds a singular ability, such as a special attack or a repair function. Conveniently, a suit can be set as a favorite, so you automatically start matches wearing it.

I've played well over a dozen matches of Exoprimal at this point, and it continues to be a fun and often-chaotic good time, especially alongside some buddies over chat. Though it plays exceptionally, I'm still unsure if the game can sustain interest in the months after release. The story will only hook players for so long (if at all), so we'll see if there's enough meat on these fossilized bones to keep players returning for more.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4
Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 10-Player Online Action
PUBLISHER Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom
RELEASE July 14

TOTAL WAR: PHARAOH

Ancient attrition

Total War: Pharaoh, the latest entry in the long-running military tactics series, provides developer Creative Assembly with an interesting challenge: how do you make a Total War game about a civilization whose best-known eras are times of peace? After I got a chance to go hands-on with the game, Creative Director Maya Georgieva and Lead Battle Designer Milcho Vasilev answered some of my questions.

"Not every setting is suitable for Total War," Georgieva says. "Total War thrives in times of crisis or peril, and in times when a lot of different forces are vying for power, or maybe for survival."

Many of the most iconic figures from ancient Egypt, like pyramid-building pharaoh Khufu or its final ruler Cleopatra, lived thousands of years apart and wouldn't make for great subjects for a military-based series. Total War: Pharaoh decides to focus on the collapse of The Bronze Age, a tumultuous transitionary period that engulfed the Mediterranean region in conflict. Because of the focus on that specific era, despite its namesake, Total War: Pharaoh is about more than Egypt.

"Even though Egypt is one of the most powerful nations at that time in that region, this game's still not focused just on them," Vasilev says. "We still have the Empire of the Hittites, which is very strong at that moment in time. We have the Canaanites in between them." Of the eight factions available in the game, two are Canaanite, two are Hittite, and only four are Egyptian, and each of them has access to unique units and strategies.

After going hands-on, I can say that Total War: Pharaoh hews closely to what you'd expect from the series, though Creative Assembly has made a few significant steps to differentiate its gameplay from earlier games in the franchise. Firstly, the game is much slower than its predecessors, making actions feel more deliberate and impactful. You really have to be sure before deploying your troops to a certain area, because they won't be coming back any time soon.

Units have also been improved in numerous ways. They now have updated A.I. and battle animations, so individual fighters can actually be seen exchanging blows, rather than just attacking the air near an enemy group. And the addition of combat stances allows them to make subtle moves during battles, pushing or pulling their opponents to gain the upper hand.

These unit stances are best combined with Total War: Pharaoh's new dynamic terrain and weather systems. Before starting a mission, players can see a weather forecast for the battle and prepare themselves accordingly. If it's looking sweltering, you might be able to ignite some nearby greenery to get the jump on your opponents. If there's an impending sandstorm, the lowered visibility will punish your missile units severely. This weather also affects the terrain: rain can flood certain areas and turn others into mud.

While you can see a prediction of the weather before it occurs, it's just that: a prediction.

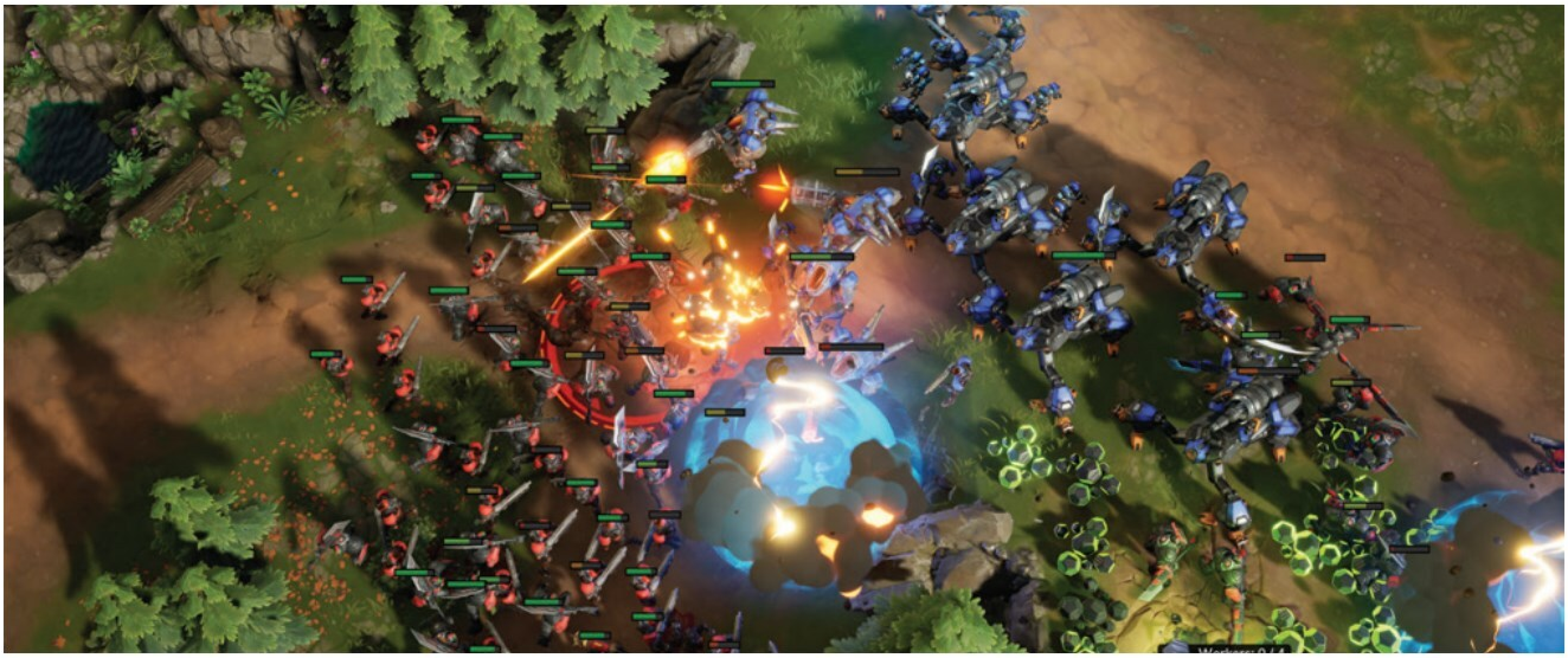
"This prediction is never going to be false, but it's also not completely accurate," Vasliev says. "So if, for example, you get the prediction, 'now it's dry and it will turn into rain,' it might turn to rain, but it doesn't tell you when exactly." If you stay in battle long enough, the weather change is guaranteed to happen, but you cannot know if it will change in two minutes or 20 minutes. Georgieva chimes in to add that certain weather conditions are impossible: it can't thunderstorm in the middle of the Sahara.

Total War: Pharaoh is a risk for the series, swapping cavalry units for chariots and picking a period of history many may not be familiar with. But between Creative Assembly's clear expert knowledge of the era and active efforts to make combat new and interesting, it feels like those risks might pay off. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy (2-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Sega **DEVELOPER** Creative Assembly **RELEASE** October

STORMGATE

Returning to the classics



Last year, I was fortunate to get an early look at Stormgate, the debut project from Frost Giant Studios. While the development house and game title may be new, the project is perhaps better understood as the next offering from a superstar team made up of real-time strategy luminaries, including many individuals who were part of the Warcraft III and Starcraft II development teams. New footage reveals how far the game has come in the year since I saw it last and suggests that longtime RTS fans should be watching this one closely.

Stormgate establishes a new post-apocalyptic fiction set hundreds of years in Earth's future. A demonic alien invasion force has pushed humanity to the brink of extinction, and a scrappy resistance force of humans is fighting back against destruction. An involved narrative plays out over campaign missions that can be played solo or cooperatively. Both sides of this conflict are playable factions (with additional factions to be added later), but my most recent early look showcases a good bit of the human faction's capability.

The PvP sequences demoed for me recall fun moments from both Warcraft III and Starcraft II, which comes as no surprise given the team's background. While still in pre-alpha, the playable game looks excellent running in Unreal Engine 5 on the developer's new SnowPlay tech.

In one battle, an Atlas artillery mech deploys in a way reminiscent of Starcraft's siege tanks, flinging out a ton of AoE damage from a stationary position. In another sequence, we see a squad of Exo soldiers stutter-stepping to avoid a pack of robot dog scout units. In addition to having laser eyes (which is unassailably cool) these mechanized canine scouts can sense enemies in the fog of war and highlight them. The battle sequences I witnessed reveal a game of tight, tactical encounters with an entertaining mix of units that lead to wildly variable strategies.

I was also intrigued by the permeability of some of the landscape. In many RTS games, walls of forest or other terrain block all units. But in Stormgate, smaller units like Lancers and Exos can push through, while the larger mechs and other vehicles can't. Some terrain elements are also destructible, adding another layer of complexity to how you might need to protect your base.

Stormgate follows some familiar patterns on the build side, though the developer shared some of the specifics remain in flux. A primary resource called Luminite pays for most buildings, units, and upgrades. While it's essential for each faction, the way it is gathered is asymmetric, and different for each team. A second resource, currently dubbed Therium, enriches over time. If ungathered, it will spill out onto the ground. Collecting that resource is a more extended task, but its acquisition fuels higher-tier units and upgrades.

I'm especially excited to see more of Stormgate's announced three-player co-op vs. A.I. mode, which promises to bring a new twist to the way players engage with strategy games on a social level. Likewise, I have fond memories of big storytelling beats in the Warcraft and Starcraft games, and I'm eager to see some of the same creative voices exploring a new narrative. Stormgate is still a good period out from its full launch, but we likely don't have too long to wait before a closed beta begins to offer a more comprehensive picture of the promising title. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy (Multiplayer TBA) **PUBLISHER** Frost Giant Studios
DEVELOPER Frost Giant Studios **RELEASE** TBA

ASGARD'S WRATH 2

An ambitious virtual reality sequel

Released in 2019, the original Asgard's Wrath remains one of virtual reality's biggest and most ambitious games. While many virtual reality games focus on smaller, experimental experiences that can be completed over a few short gameplay sessions, Asgard's Wrath attempted to tell a large story with in-depth action-RPG mechanics, and by most metrics, it was a success. It rewarded players who gave it the necessary time a whole Norse mythology adventure, complete with puzzles and exciting virtual reality melee combat.

The sequel picks up where the first game left off. As a fledgling god in the original, you were taken under Loki's wing, and as things usually go with fiction's greatest trickster, they went awry. You're still dealing with Loki in Asgard's Wrath 2, but you are in a new setting with new characters, new abilities, and a better understanding of what to expect from Loki. "The second game starts off, Loki has escaped. We have these characters called the Weavers of Fate. They kind of live on a cosmic layer, and they nudge you a little bit as a fledgling God, and they fully transform you into what you are now, which is the cosmic guardian," says studio creative director Mat Kraemer.

Kraemer calls it a story of revenge where you have broken your binds to Asgard. Video footage points to an Egyptian setting for the game, but Kraemer is cryptic. "You never know where we're going," Kraemer says, heavily implying a wink, but without closing an eye. "There's a lot of fun places to explore."

The melee action from Asgard's Wrath returns but with expanded combat abilities and choices. The first game focused on blocking, parrying, and removing shields from your opponents. You still do that in the sequel, but Kraemer wants players to be able to play more offensively, if they choose, and take advantage of all the new weapons. "We want players to experiment with those weapons and use them in different ways," Kraemer says. "Some players may be using the shield and axe, and you may have an enemy that shields you from the front. You can throw the axe, and you stop it in midair, and you pull it behind to the weak point behind the enemy."

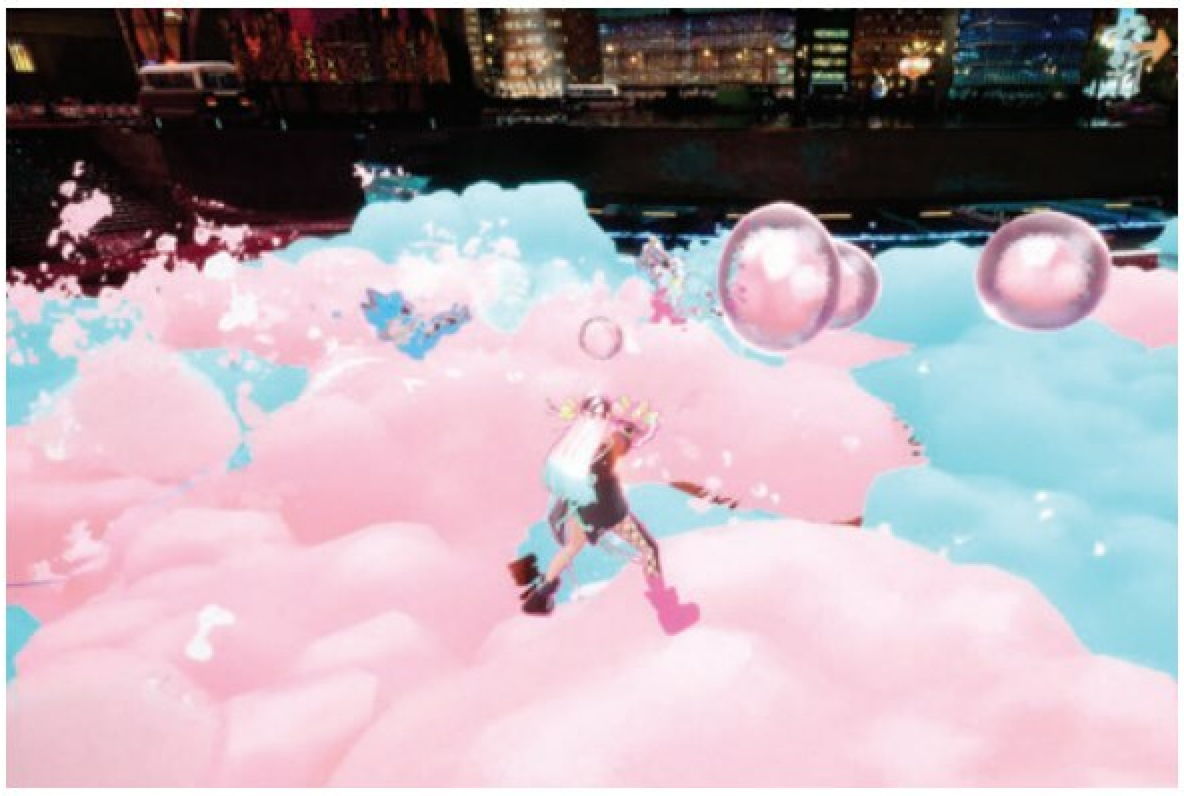
You can also call on assistant characters who will help in combat, and some of them can turn into mounts. One I was able to see in action was a rideable panther.

The other significant upgrade for the sequel is the Uncharted Rifts. You will encounter this feature a few hours into the game, which amounts to randomized dungeon floors you can play over and over to see how far you can get and earn resources. "When I say random, we basically randomize everything. The enemy mobs, the floors, what you're getting. We've got floors that are dedicated to shops. We have floors dedicated to something we call Godly Challenges," Kramer says, citing just a few of the things you will encounter in the rifts. If you make it a reasonable distance, you can also send an A.I. version of your character to other players attempting the Uncharted Rifts to help them out. You can also choose to send that character out to hinder other players. You can check in with your A.I. avatar after they've been out in the world for a few days and see what they have been up to.

Like the original game, Asgard's Wrath 2 is longer than the typical VR game. "We're looking at 60 plus hours of gameplay here," Kramer says of the sequel. The other significant benefit of the sequel, beyond expanding what players like about the first game and continuing the story, is it is releasing on Quest 2 and 3, which means you no longer need to be tethered to a PC to play. "I love bringing these kinds of experiences to VR and just showing everybody what this medium really is capable of," Kraemer says. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM Meta Quest 3 • Meta Quest 2 **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Oculus Studios
DEVELOPER Sanzaru Games **RELEASE** 2023

FOAMSTARS



Square Enix is seemingly taking a page out of Splatoon's playbook with Foamstars, a competitive 4v4 multiplayer shooter centering on blasting opponents with, you guessed it, foam. An arsenal of wacky weapons allows the foam to be used offensively and defensively, such as creating foam barriers, building terrain, or making slippery floors to glide across. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 **STYLE** 1 to 8-Player Shooter **PUBLISHER** Square Enix
DEVELOPER Square Enix **RELEASE** TBA

MARATHON

Bungie is reinventing its classic '90s sci-fi shooter Marathon into a new PvP extraction experience. Players control cybernetic mercenaries called Runners exploring a hostile planet for artifacts, upgrades, and other treasures. The goal is to escape with as big a haul as possible while battling opponents or slipping away unscathed.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1 to 8-Player Shooter
PUBLISHER Bungie **DEVELOPER** Bungie **RELEASE** TBA

DRAGON'S DOGMA 2

The original Dragon's Dogma is the epitome of a cult classic. Its unique take on open-world medieval fantasy has inspired a small, but enthusiastic fanbase who have been clamoring for a sequel for years. It is finally on the way with director Hideaki Itsuno back in the director's seat with mechanics like the Pawns and a focus on scaling the creatures you're fighting all making a return.

BY KYLE HILLIARD

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Capcom
DEVELOPER Capcom **RELEASE** TBA

THE TALOS PRINCIPLE II

The original Talos Principle, released in 2014, presented a world populated by robots where humans have long been extinct. Inspired by narrative puzzle games like Portal, it was up to the player to solve a series of environmental puzzles while unspooling a fascinating, narrative mystery. The sequel continues the game's story but increases the visual creativity of the world with beautiful sprawling vistas that serve as a backdrop to the brain teasers. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Puzzle
PUBLISHER Devolver Digital **DEVELOPER** Croteam **RELEASE** 2023

TOWER OF AGHASBA

In Tower of Aghasba, players control a not-yet-named protagonist as they explore an open world while trying to rebuild it. Footage of the game shows the main character gliding across an alien landscape with a paraglider while picking up various items presumably used for bringing their world back to life. The Breath of the Wild vibes are strong, and we welcome them with open arms. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Dreamlit inc.
DEVELOPER Dreamlit inc. **RELEASE** 2024

HELSKATE

In Helskate, you are a skateboarder trying to make your way through the hellscape of Vertheim with impressive tricks and a little bit of melee combat. The game is a roguelike, according to one of its designers who also worked on Tony Hawk's Underground, which is considered by many to be the series' apex. We're excited to try the genre mix-up Helskate is promising. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Phantom Coast
DEVELOPER Phantom Coast
RELEASE 2024 (Early Access)

SUMMERHILL

The creators of the Alto's Adventure and Odyssey endless runners are back with something entirely new. The game retains the beautiful visuals of those two games, but the brief snippet shared belies a puzzle game about herding sheep. It's not what we expected from the developer, but we're excited to try something new from the team. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Land & Sea
DEVELOPER Land & Sea
RELEASE TBA

THE PLUCKY SQUIRE

James Turner was a designer at Pokémon developer Game Freak as far back as Black and White, but he recently left the company to create his own video game. The Plucky Squire takes place inside a storybook, and the player can leap out of the page to interact with the book and the desk it is placed on. The visual style is charming and the action looks joyful. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Devolver
DEVELOPER All Possible Future
RELEASE 2023

NEVA

Making a heart-wrenching debut with an emotional trailer during PlayStation's recent showcase, Neva is the newest game from the creators of Gris. Through platforming, puzzles, and battles with monstrous enemies, this indie tells the story of a woman and a white wolf making their way through a dying world. If the reveal trailer is any indication, it will probably make us cry. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER Nomada Studio **RELEASE** 2024

GHOSTRUNNER 2

Taking place one year after the first game's conclusion, Ghostrunner 2 will have players face off against more challenging bosses, learn new skills, and explore new levels, expanding past the Dharma Tower where the first game was set. On top of all that, Ghostrunner 2 introduces a motorcycle, which allows for new traversal techniques and bigger levels. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** 505 Games
DEVELOPER One More Level **RELEASE** 2023

SWORD OF THE SEA

From the first shot in Sword of the Sea's reveal trailer, it was clear that it was the next game from Giant Squid, the studio that made Abzû and The Pathless. Traverse dunes that ripple like ocean waves on the hoversword, a floating blade you ride like a hoverboard. With fish swimming in the air and colossal architecture in the distance, Sword of the Sea has a world I'm eager to explore. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Giant Squid
DEVELOPER Giant Squid **RELEASE** TBA

PHANTOM BLADE ZERO

Combining Chinese-inspired imagery and steampunk aesthetics, Phantom Blade Zero is a fast-paced action RPG from Chinese developer S-Game. Featuring beautifully animated combat in a bleak world, Phantom Blade's battles aim to balance the intensity of Soulslikes and the fast-paced action of Devil May Cry. The gameplay we've seen is striking and mesmerizing, and I can't wait to get my hands on it. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** S-Game
DEVELOPER S-Game **RELEASE** TBA

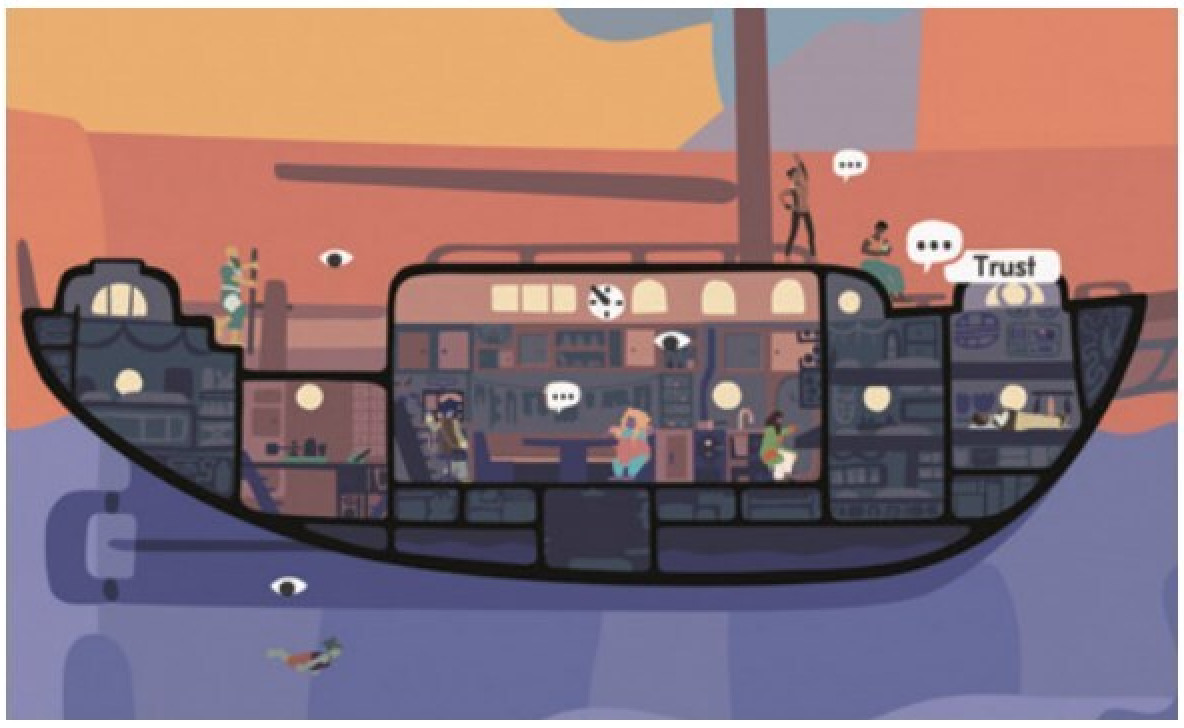
JOHN CARPENTER'S TOXIC COMMANDO

Inspired by the '80s action movies director John Carpenter is known for, Toxic Commando follows a squad of under-qualified mercenaries as they fight a Sludge God. "Look, I really like shooting zombies," Carpenter says. "They keep telling me that they're called 'the infected.' Please. They're ghouls, dude. They blow up real good and there are a ton of them." **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter (2-4 Online)
PUBLISHER Focus Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Saber Interactive **RELEASE** 2024

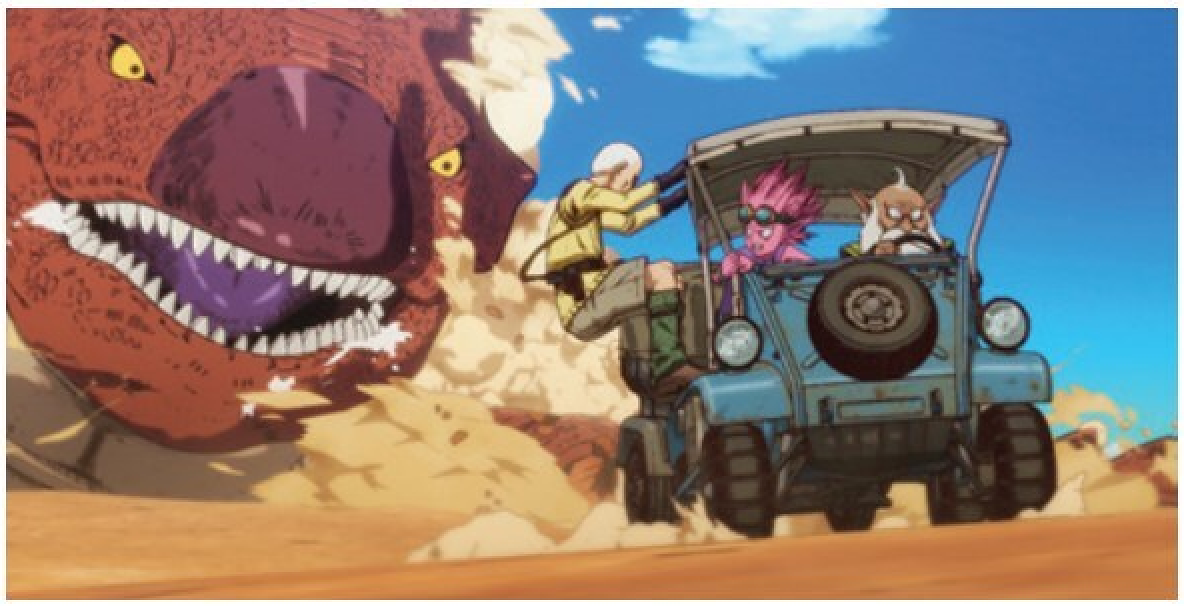
SALTSEA CHRONICLES

SaltSea Chronicles is a charming narrative-driven game about a ship's crew trying to track down its captain. As you explore the sea for clues about their whereabouts, you make decisions about where to explore, decide how your crew members interact, and encounter unique islands, like the cat-filled locale of Los Gatos. With a charming art style and promising quality-of-life features, we can test the waters of SaltSea Chronicles later this year. **BY CHARLES HARTE**



PLATFORM PS5 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Die Gute Fabrik **DEVELOPER** Die Gute Fabrik **RELEASE** 2023

SAND LAND



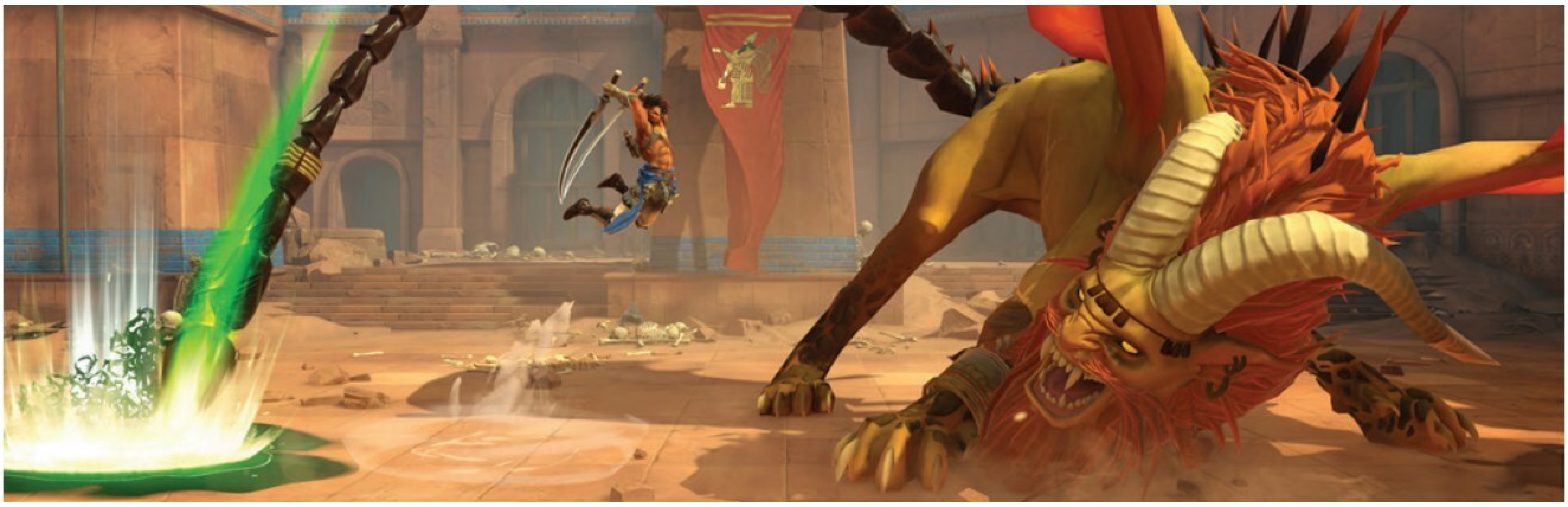
Based on the manga and upcoming film, Sand Land is the story of unlikely friends trying to survive in a desert short on water. The universe comes from the mind of Dragon Ball creator Akira Toriyama, and the game will feature a focus on vehicular RPG combat, as well as good old on-foot combat. Toriyama has lent his visual style to plenty of games (Chrono Trigger, Dragon Quest), and Dragon Ball is no stranger to video game adaptations, but it's exciting to see something entirely new from the legendary artist/writer. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

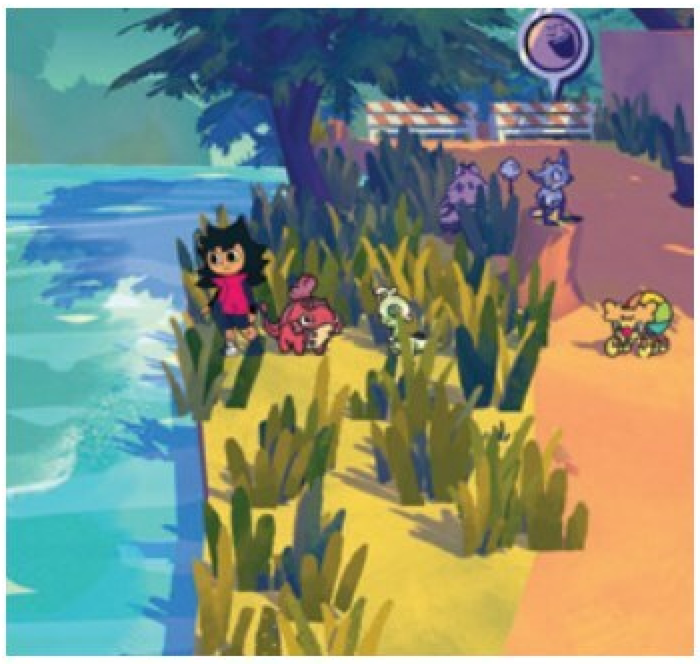
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Bandai Namco **DEVELOPER** Bandai Namco **RELEASE** TBD

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN

The Prince of Persia franchise has been dormant for more than a decade, which is what made the announcement of The Lost Crown so exciting. This entry returns to the series' 2D roots, but unlike the original's methodical and precise platforming, The Lost Crown is fast-paced and apparently adopting a Metroidvania structure. The combat also looks flashy and impressive. It's unclear what, if any, connection there is to the previous games, but we like what we've seen so far. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Montpellier **RELEASE** January 18, 2024





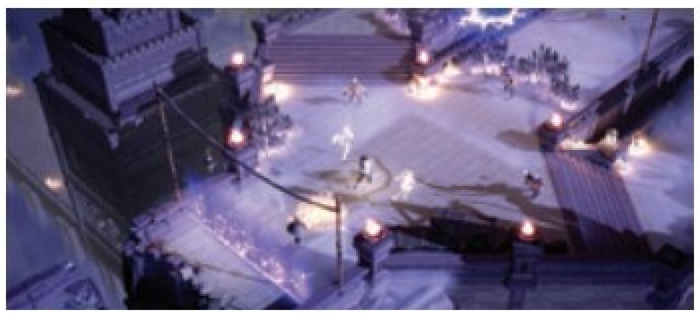
BEASTIEBALL

Beastieball has a simple premise: what if Pokémon just wanted to play volleyball instead of battling? In this turn-based RPG, explore an open world, befriend monsters called Beasties, and recruit them to your Beastieball team. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Wishes Unlimited
DEVELOPER Wishes Unlimited **RELEASE** 2024

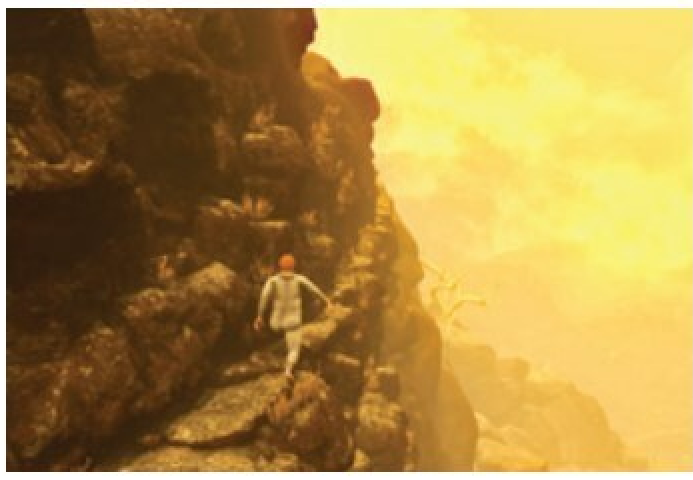
LYSFANGA: THE TIME SHIFT WARRIOR

We played Lysfanga: The Time Shift Warrior at Summer Game Fest, which left a great impression. The core gameplay of this top-down hack 'n' slash involves creating loops of yourself, rewinding time, and fighting alongside past versions to clear challenging arenas full of puzzling enemies. Head to GameInformer.com for more about this student-developed project. **BY ALEX VAN AKEN**



PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Spotlight by Quantic Dream
DEVELOPER Sand Door Studio **RELEASE** 2023

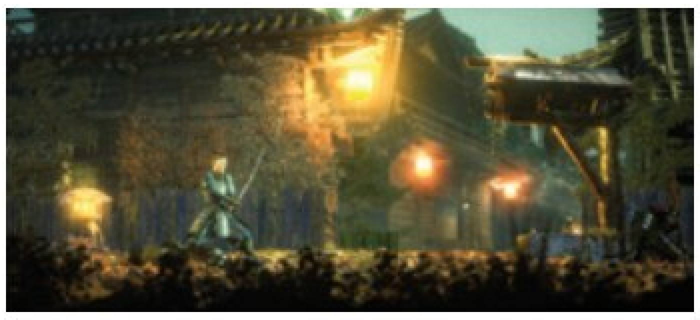
BABY STEPS



The minds behind Ape Out and Getting Over It have teamed up to create Baby Steps, a literal walking simulator about helping Nate, a lazy 35-year-old man, take his first steps out into the world. This involves manually controlling each of his legs to awkwardly traverse terrain using real physics, and each step triggers beats from a dynamic soundtrack. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER Devolver Digital **DEVELOPER** Gabe Cuzzillo, Maxi Boch, Bennett Foddy **RELEASE** 2024

THE SPIRIT OF THE SAMURAI



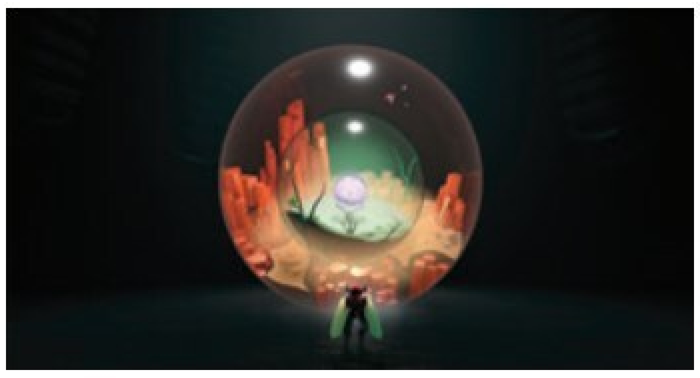
A 2D Metroidvania inspired by Japanese mythology and classic stop-motion animation? Sign us up. In The Spirit of the Samurai, players switch between using a swordsman, a Kodama spirit, and a cat to battle Oni and other threats. The Ray Harryhausen-style animation gives the game a nostalgic visual appeal that evokes films like the original *Clash of the Titans*. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

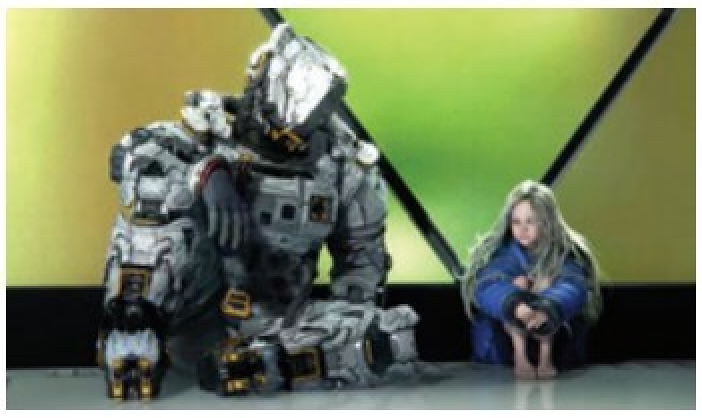
PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Kwalee **DEVELOPER** Digital Mind Games
RELEASE 2024

COCOON

Cocoon comes from a lead designer behind Inside and Limbo, and while it's quite different, fans of those games will likely appreciate what this game's doing. Blending an alien sci-fi world with minimalist but beautiful visuals and an atmospheric score, the star of the show are the unique puzzles built into the surrounding environment. It plays great and teases the brain just enough. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Annapurna Interactive
DEVELOPER Geometric Interactive **RELEASE** 2023





PRAGMATA

We've only known a few things about Pragmata since its reveal in 2020: it stars a little girl with mysterious powers and her space suit-wearing guardian, it's set in a dystopian moon world, and it's taking forever to release. Capcom recently hammered that last point home, delaying Pragmata indefinitely. We hope we don't have another Deep Down on our hands. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Capcom
DEVELOPER Capcom **RELEASE** TBA

FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH

The second chapter of Final Fantasy VII Remake looks massive. Square Enix revealed the adventure is spread across two discs as Cloud and Co. (now including Yuffie) venture beyond Midgar to stop Sephiroth. The action is flashy, the world looks fantastic, and the story should be chock full of surprises as we venture into seemingly uncharted territory.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Square Enix
DEVELOPER Square Enix **RELEASE** 2024

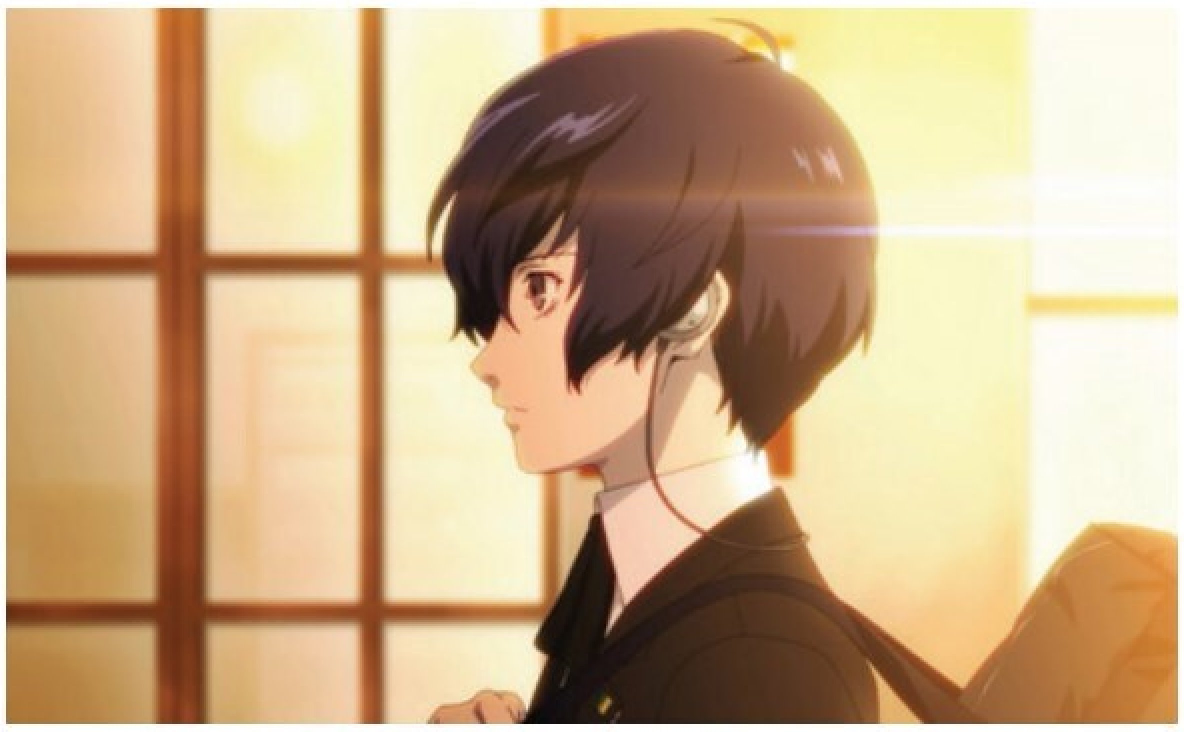
MONSTER HUNTER NOW

Developed by Niantic, the studio behind Pokémon Go, Monster Hunter Now blends real-world maps and player movement with monsters from Capcom's long-running Monster Hunter series. Layered on top of the map surrounding you are Monster Hunter elements meant to emulate the games. It promises to bring the hunting action the series is famous for, and we're curious to see how it all works later this year. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM iOS • Android **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Capcom
DEVELOPER Niantic **RELEASE** September 2023

PERSONA 3 RELOAD

For longtime Persona fans, the third entry is often cited as a favorite, even if the fifth is the most mechanically sound and best-looking. The classic RPG received a port earlier this year, but now a full, from-the-ground-up remake of the 2006 PlayStation 2 game is on the way. Unfortunately, it won't include the content added for the PSP release, but who knows? Maybe it can be added as DLC. **BY KYLE HILLIARD** ■



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Sega, Atlus **DEVELOPER** Atlus **RELEASE** Early 2024

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GI MUST PLAY

STREET FIGHTER 6

A clean reversal

It's no secret that Street Fighter V got off to a disastrous start, and despite years of course correction, its flawed foundation made a comeback difficult. By contrast, Street Fighter 6 is a thorough response to its predecessor's failings, defined by well-considered central mechanics, formidable single-player offerings, and a plethora of smart decisions that make for a powerful opening punch.

Those primarily interested in duking it out against other players have a lot to look forward to; between the snappy movement and wealth of strategic options, it's a joy to play. The biggest addition is the new Drive System, which elegantly combines several mechanics like powered-up special attacks, cancels, and defensive maneuvers under a shared resource. This meter starts fully stocked and replenishes automatically, giving ready access to a large arsenal of options, but leaves you vulnerable when depleted, setting up a compelling risk/reward dynamic that tinges on every interaction.

Additionally, the game's pace feels more deliberate than Street Fighter V, creating rewarding back-and-forth exchanges allowing its more cerebral elements to shine. Specifically, the extended range of normal attacks makes careful poking battles more common, and strikes are less advantageous when blocked, meaning aggressors can't single-mindedly run their offense. The 18-character roster is also a slam dunk, combining returning favorites with cleverly designed newcomers to deliver a wide variety of playstyles and degrees of complexity. Each has a robust move set, and almost every fighter has a unique gimmick that can transform the match.

For instance, Manon is a grappler whose command grabs become more damaging every time one lands, making her an imposing momentum-based character, while Jamie is a Drunken Master-style brawler who gains new moves with each chug. Every major character archetype feels well-represented here, from zoners to rushdown characters, meaning players shouldn't have a hard time finding someone who speaks to them. While only time will tell how the metagame shakes out, Street Fighter 6's starting roster and core systems offer an excellent platform to build upon.

And for those less interested in playing against others, the most noteworthy mode is World Tour. This lengthy single-player story lets you explore a semi-open Metro City filled with fisticuff-loving weirdos, side quests, and RPG-lite progression. In addition to being an enjoyably strange adventure, it also successfully introduces and tutorializes some of the game's deeper systems while offering a largely satisfying series of brawls.

Battles in World Tour are enticing thanks to foes' unique attack patterns and how each enemy is paired with optional objectives that grant bonus rewards. Best of all, your avatar can learn abilities from the main roster, allowing you to mix the best elements of grapplers, zoners, and rushdown characters into a hilariously broken fighter. I was genuinely surprised by how much there is to this mode, and it took me more than 25 hours to reach the credits. While the World Tour is far from perfect – some fights felt overly chaotic due to how they handle being sandwiched between multiple enemies, and the overarching storytelling leaves much to be desired – it is a solid entry point for new players that will give those uninterested in testing their mettle online plenty to do.

Beyond this, an abundance of inclusions demonstrates an impressive degree of polish. There are multiple control schemes aimed at beginners, party settings, a robust training room, Arcade mode, accessibility options, and a fully realized lobby system. Tack on well-implemented rollback netcode, quick rematches, and the ability to queue up for online games from almost anywhere, and Street Fighter 6 makes it easy to get in and play.

As the series that pioneered fighting games, each new Street Fighter comes with weighty expectations. Street Fighter 6 confidently meets this hype, catering to neophytes and genre veterans by delivering the most extensive array of offline offerings the franchise has ever seen alongside a flexible set of core systems and a diverse cast. Between its cohesive aesthetic, the bounty of clever features, and crisp central gameplay, it's one of the most impressive entries the genre has seen in some time. **BY ELIJAH GONZALEZ**

9.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom
RELEASE June 2 **RATING** T

DIABLO IV

Heaven-sent

Diablo IV successfully tempts me to gleefully indulge in sin at every turn. A thrilling hunt for rare loot feeds my insatiable greed and lust for power. The satisfaction of slaughtering thousands of foes, supernatural or otherwise, leaves little room for remorse. Whether taking down the forces of darkness alone or with friends, this is a massive and deeply engrossing action RPG that keeps me coming back for more dozens upon dozens of hours later.

Diablo IV delivers a profoundly satisfying fantasy of growing a character from a one-trick pony to an unstoppable, highly specialized killing machine, thanks to its well-paced progression and pipeline of systems that reward multiple aspects of play. No matter which of the five classes you fancy, an increased focus on player maneuverability and a litany of enemies that encourage skillful play result in entertaining, thoughtful, and chaotic combat scenarios. Titanic, lengthy boss encounters skirt the line of feeling manageable and won by the skin of my teeth, offering the best examples of the game's good difficulty balance.

I love that becoming stronger has less to do with grinding to raise my level and more with how I adjusted loadouts to maximize my playstyle and abilities. Tinkering with gear proves an obsessive venture since I can replace unwanted armor traits with new ones, destroy useless loot for materials to improve favored equipment, or add sockets for stat-boosting gems. Loot drops bestow powerful gear at a good cadence, but even lousy gear feels valuable since, at the very least, I can turn common rags into vital materials to transform a great weapon into its final form.

Exploring can sometimes feel like a chore (it takes a while to get a mount, and enemies are relentless) but it's a blast to uncover Sanctuary's five massive regions. Tackling over 100 good side-quests, locating dozens of stat-raising Altars of Lilith, and exploring tons of randomized dungeons, feels worthwhile as they feed into Renown. This effective rewards system high-fives players for completing routine tasks like finding new areas, completing quests, and unlocking waypoints by granting additional skill points and, best of all, more potions. Strongholds – objective-based, enemy-laden areas – are my favorite side activity. Their steep and unique challenges presented worthy tests of my skill for a usually big payoff, such as new settlements and quests.

Diablo IV's always-online framework is largely unobtrusive during moment-to-moment gameplay. I generally favor solo play, but I never felt like the presence of others impeded my adventure, and the occasional instances I did encounter another human avatar added neat moments of emergent storytelling. While I'm happy to bid a friendly wave to such helpers before moving on, forming groups with strangers is easy, as is assembling friend parties to raid dungeons as a squad. Diablo IV's reliance on an internet connection is still irksome on a conceptual level due to the reality of server issues preventing logins, and the cosmetics store is pricey for a full-priced title.

Tack on a strong, cinematic narrative and a robust and enjoyable endgame, and Diablo IV continually seduces players with its promises of power and riches and regularly follows through. I've had a tough time putting it down even after starting fresh numerous times, and I get excited thinking about how I'll be foiling Lilith's plans in the months ahead as seasonal updates begin rolling out. Until then, I'm happy to continue relieving Sanctuary of its treasures – and demons of their lives – in this devilishly impressive epic.

BY MARCUS STEWART

9.25

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Blizzard Entertainment
DEVELOPER Blizzard Entertainment **RELEASE** June 6 **RATING** M

PLANET OF LANA

Chasing potential

Since the release of Limbo in 2010, cinematic puzzle platformers have relied on capturing players' attention and imagination with beautiful art directions and compelling, often enigmatic storytelling. As typically brief experiences, the moment-to-moment puzzles must hit hard with clever, memorable obstacles and not meander by rehashing familiar mechanics too often. Planet of Lana almost hits this sweet spot by boasting a gorgeous presentation, but trekking through this strange world doesn't always inspire the same awe.

As the young Lana, your small village, including someone close to you, has been abducted by alien machines. It's up to you to find and free everyone, and you're joined by an adorable (and pettable) cat-like companion named Mui. Watching tender and somber moments between the pair is a treat because everything looks so wonderful. From painterly grassy plains to postcard-worthy beachside vistas, several snapshots are worthy of being framed as art pieces. The majestic soundtrack sits high on my list of the year's best, with the main theme, in particular, becoming a welcomed earworm that also has intriguing narrative significance.

The game delivers an adequately entertaining tale, and it's tough not to smile at Lana and Mui's cute, though limited, interactions. The more exciting world-building happens along the edges, primarily through collectible, easy-to-miss fragments of an illuminating wall carving. Is this Earth or another planet? What are the machines, and where did they come from? Planet of Lana leaves some answers vague, but the intrigue helped propel me forward even if I'm still drawing my own conclusions.

Lana's deliberate, momentum-based movement feels fine but occasionally causes headaches, such as slipping over an edge after a big jump. Problem-solving involves the sometimes tedious task of moving objects into their correct positions and doing things in the proper order so that both characters can bypass obstacles. Mui's superior agility means you'll be commanding them to drop climbing ropes for Lana, activate distant switches, or lure away enemies. I just wish Mui didn't halt after performing actions so I wouldn't have to call them to my side constantly. Eventually, Mui and Lana can hijack animals' minds or hack machines, respectively, to make them serve as platforms or weights for pressure-sensitive switches. These are cool abilities I wish the game utilized more often.

These traversal puzzles have some clever ideas, but they don't evolve much or hit that next gear. You push objects, climb ropes, and crouch in tall grass to avoid patrolling machines for the bulk of the journey, albeit in moderately more elaborate ways. Some less recurring exercises break up this routine, such as manipulating the water level in lakes, but nothing I tackled truly wowed me, and I sometimes groaned when puzzles returned to the status quo. I solved a few obstacles at first glance, and others can be disappointingly simple even deep into the game. Puzzle-solving may be middling, but Planet of Lana has a sprinkling of adrenaline-pumping moments. I got a kick out of a quick-time-event-driven race across the desert as your mount sprints through an armada of colossal marching machines.

While I would have liked gameplay to have more bite and variety, Planet of Lana is still an enjoyable and beautiful romp. The art direction and main jingle are likely the only things that will stick with me in the long run, but Lana and Mui's journey is a competent rescue mission that doesn't always soar as high as the machines pursuing them. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

7.75

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Thunderful
DEVELOPER Wishfully **RELEASE** May 23 **RATING** E10+

SUPER MEGA BASEBALL 4

A solid changeup

As the genre has progressed through the generations, sports video games have become increasingly complicated as they add more wrinkles to their team management tools and more depth to their on-the-field action. Super Mega Baseball 4 harkens back to the sports games of the mid-'90s, bringing streamlined gameplay and astounding levels of customization while introducing novel concepts. But though the throwback approach is sound in many ways, it does come with some concessions.

Stepping onto the field in Super Mega Baseball 4 is a welcoming affair. I love the arcade-style approach gameplay takes. Through rock-solid mechanics, you can blast through a game in short order, all while feeling like you had a huge impact on every play. Metalhead Studio has done a great job of making it so scoring a strikeout from the rubber feels as good as sending a ball soaring into the bleachers from the batter's box. However, fielding leaves some to be desired, as diving feels imprecise, and I sometimes struggled to predict where to position my outfielder.

Batters and fielders automatically lock onto the ball, while pitching and throwing is determined by quick minigames. Though it grew on me over the tens of games I played through, I always wished I could change the pitching game, which requires you to line up a moving reticle with your target.

Each of these can be tuned by changing your "Ego," which essentially makes up your difficulty sliders, but I'm disappointed that none of these can be further changed. In fact, that's one of my chief complaints about the otherwise solid Super Mega Baseball 4: The options are so barebones that they essentially only allow you to tune the audio and visuals of the game, but not the gameplay itself. If you want a different camera angle or to alter the control schemes, you're completely out of luck.

Conversely, when it comes to team management, Super Mega Baseball 4 shines perhaps brighter than any other sports game to date. With hundreds of fictional players and real legends, the game already features a respectable roster even without the MLB license. However, I wanted to pay homage to the '90s era of baseball from which this game draws inspiration, and Super Mega Baseball 4 enabled me to do more than I even wanted, allowing me to customize every player's looks, gear, animations, music, and abilities, plus the uniforms and logo of my team.

I poured hours into creating my own squad full of some of the stars not in the game, and when I was finished, the time investment was well worth it as I had a team full of my favorite players from the era in which I obsessed over the sport. The customization options in Super Mega Baseball 4 are nothing short of remarkable, and if you're like me and took your virtual tee-ball swings in games like Triple Play Gold Edition or Tony La Russa Baseball 2, you will absolutely adore the roster control options of this game.

You can take any team into one-off games, single seasons, bracket-style tournaments, online leagues, or my personal favorite mode: Franchise. I adore the new Shuffle Draft system that you can select, which deals you eight cards from players still available on the draft board. After you choose your player for that round, the remaining seven cards are returned to the deck, the other teams go through the process, and you're dealt eight more cards until the rosters are full. This provides an enthralling deckbuilding twist on the traditional draft conventions of sports games.

While in Franchise mode, you're presented with managerial decisions after each game. These range from which player gets the last pair of socks to who to blame for a bad loss. Though they sometimes become tedious, these decisions affect player loyalty, which comes into play in the offseason when it's time to re-sign them. Free agency plays a big role, as contracts only last one year, and I appreciate the ability to make simple one-to-one decisions on a position basis in each offseason. However, I'm disappointed by the lack of trading available. Even in older baseball video games, trading is one of my favorite activities to do in long-form modes, so its absence is a letdown in Super Mega Baseball 4.

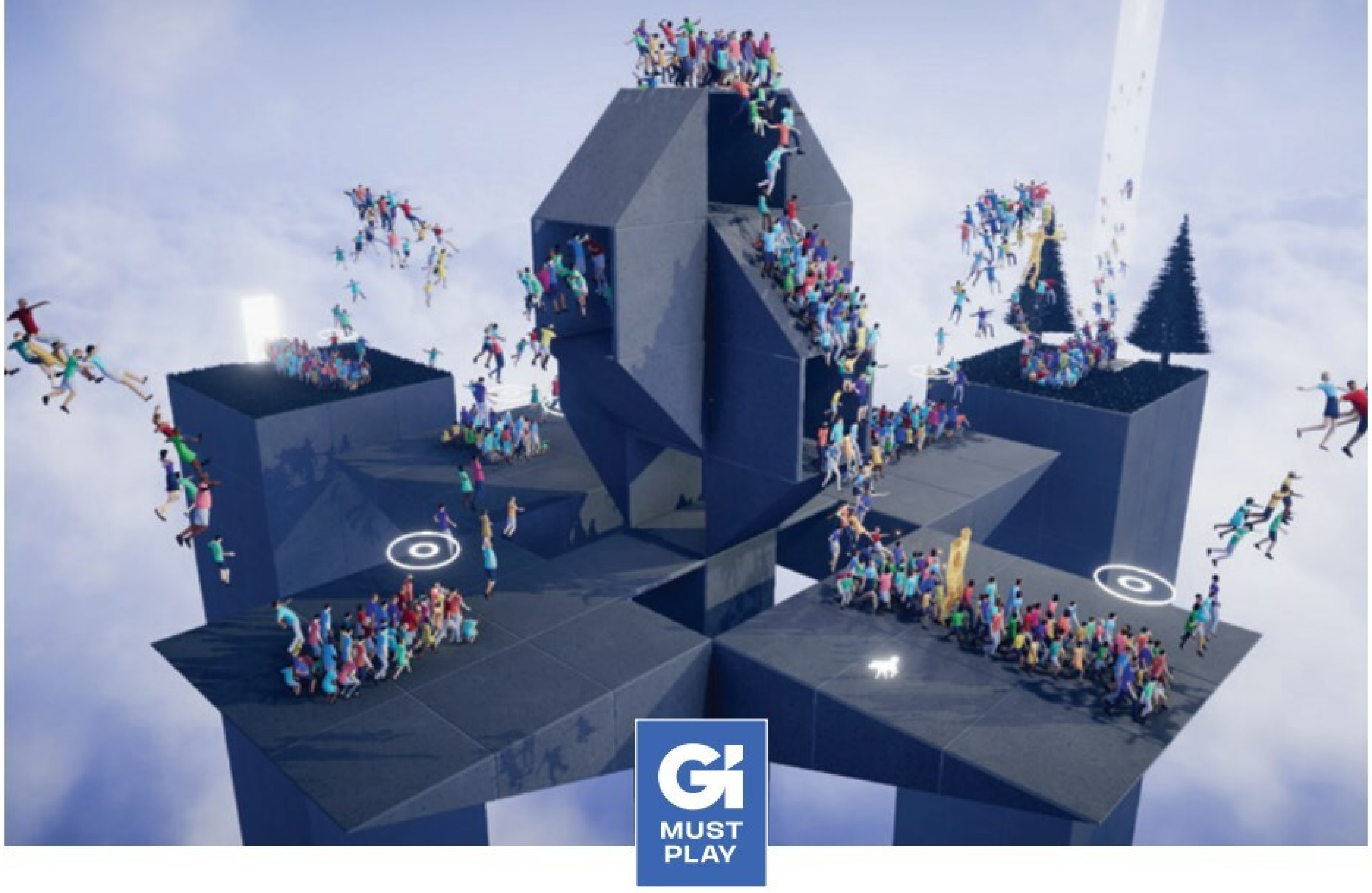
Despite some disappointing option and feature exclusions, Super Mega Baseball 4 is a strong alternative to the annualized sim-facing MLB game from Sony. Fans of retro-style arcade baseball games will find a lot to love, and roster customization enthusiasts have their new gold standard.

BY BRIAN SHEA

THE BIGFLY
VS
FIRST AT-BAT

8.25

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Sports (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER EA Sports **DEVELOPER** Metalhead Studio
RELEASE June 2 **RATING** E



GI MUST PLAY

HUMANITY

Becoming a people person

Playing god is a familiar feeling for many video game genres, like action titles where your character is unstoppable or sims where you control everything. Roleplaying a god is rarely something I feel while playing puzzle games, but Humanity provides it in new and surprising ways. The unique style of puzzle solving uses directional signs and commands to guide droves of miniature people to an endpoint. The puzzles start simple, but Humanity builds on this core system throughout its 100-plus stages in exciting and challenging ways, pushing me to my limit while telling a heartfelt story about human nature.

Humanity is an immediately striking game. Its visual style is minimalistic, but soft and beautiful backgrounds spotlight my actions as I guide colorful hordes of humans across various challenges. I begin with one simple command: a direction. I place it on the ground, and when the line of humans crosses it, they follow that direction. My journey through Humanity introduces me to plenty more commands, like ones to pause actions completely, jump, and use lightsaber-like weapons and guns to take out progress-stopping enemies. These new commands keep Humanity's puzzles feeling fresh, and it was especially interesting to see how developer Tha Ltd used challenges to change my perception of how a command can be used.

I often felt there was no way Humanity could up the ante as I marveled at my solution after spending more than 30 minutes on the most complex trials. But each time I doubt its ability to be even more challenging, Humanity introduces another wrinkle to its puzzle rules to great success. Humanity is peaceful and relaxing on its surface, which is often the case, but it is a challenging game. Built-in solution videos come in handy, though, for those who feel particularly stumped.

Humanity serves up puzzles with a surprisingly human narrative about our nature as a society, how we can work together to progress, and how we're all more connected than not. It's sweet and simple but effective, especially after guiding thousands of humans across challenges toward the light.

There are moments when Humanity feels like a chore to play, however. Because some puzzles have solutions that take minutes to play out as lines of humans walk in real-time toward the end, Humanity allows you to speed up what's happening on screen by pressing R2. This doubles the speed, but when a solution takes minutes to achieve, I'm still waiting a while. And because I often had to restart puzzles from the beginning to see if a new command would fix what prevented my humans from progressing each time, I waited a lot.

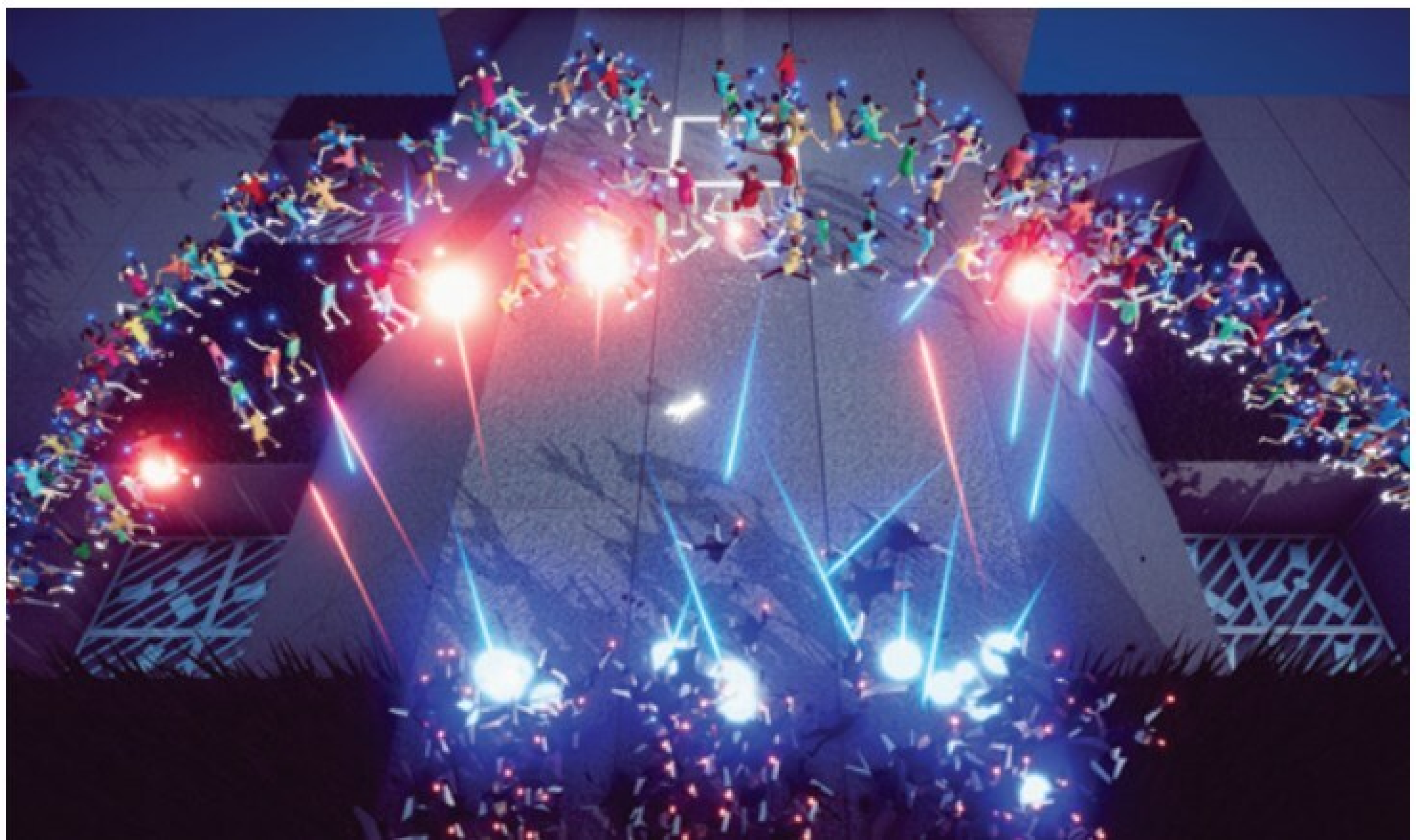
With trial restarts, you can keep your commands from the previous attempt, which helps dampen this issue, but waiting through all your other commands to see if a new one at the very end solves the puzzle gets boring; in the back third of the game, I often grabbed my phone while holding R2 to see if a new command worked. Critically, the satisfaction I feel when successfully solving a puzzle always overrides the frustrations I have while solving it.

Humanity strikes a delicate balance between challenging me at every turn and allowing me to feel like the god its narrative props me up to be. It's an imaginative experience that provides a rush I imagine computer programmers feel when dozens of commands and lines of code finally work together to create a desired outcome. Its puzzles come wrapped in a beautiful package, from its minimalist visuals to its excellent clicky electronic beats. And best of all, these elements work together to emphasize a simple but effective message about what it means to be human and why life's most intricate puzzles are easiest to solve when we work together.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC
STYLE 1-Player Puzzle
PUBLISHER Enhance **DEVELOPER** Tha Ltd
RELEASE May 16 **RATING** E10+



LEGO 2K DRIVE

Stud your engines

Best known for working on the publisher's WWE and NBA games, Visual Concepts has found itself behind the wheel of 2K's latest licensed experiment. Lego 2K Drive is a high-octane competitive racer full of destructible brick-y environments to crash through and a kid-friendly narrative full of fourth-wall-breaking fun.

The game's best feature is Bricklandia, the playful Lego landscape in which 2K Drive is set. It's a world begging to be dismantled by the brunt of your screeching tires and custom boat masts. Accelerating across the open-world playmat (that a human would never want to step on) is a thrilling experience, made better by the carefully animated auto-morphing ability. As you cross different terrain, from road to off-road and on water, players automatically switch between vehicles to fit the context.

Tires and water noodles frame the world's vistas and act as charming obstacles, and it's this blend of real-world objects with Lego constructs that amplifies the delightful toy box atmosphere. As a budding racer dropped into this striking open world, you tackle an onslaught of revheads, claiming their flags to ascend to the honor of Sky Cup Champion. Mohawked egomaniac Shadow Z serves as your rival in this endeavor, popping up from time to time to remind you of how mean-spirited he is.

To even get close to taking him on, you must explore Bricklandia in search of rival speedsters, each with their own unique driving skills they exercise in instanced Mario Kart-style races. From an actual horse to an alien in a suit, they make for a charming ensemble and provide new cars and perks to play with, as well as Brickbux, with which you can buy new machines and parts. You can also build your own vehicles brick-by-brick at the garage, which let me create some truly cursed rides. While the building system isn't the most intuitive, it does feel like an appropriate nod to Lego's humble brick-building origins.

Across Bricklandia's varied biomes, you also encounter On-The-Go Events, ambient missions that you can drop in and out of for pockets of absurd fun, such as jumping over houses or drifting through a minefield. Conquering the criteria to earn XP and resources feels like getting your license in Gran Turismo on a schoolyard sugar high.

Lego 2K Drive's constant barrage of dialogue kept me giggling throughout, though the intensity of some missions, like the less-interesting wave-defense or NPC rescue expeditions, left me unable to focus on the jokes. This was always disappointing, given the evident talent of the writers and voice actors, who provide an effective satire of conventional racing games.

Bashing and smashing your way through the map is easy junk food fun, but the must-win races can be punishing due to some devastating pickups and brutal slow down when you veer off track. Some of the open-world missions require you to drive with dexterity and attempt deft movements while herding rockets or smashing through tiny robot invaders, which can lead to frustration, where I often felt too fast for my own good. While I relished how it got my heart pounding, I was left longing for a more low-key approach to exploration.

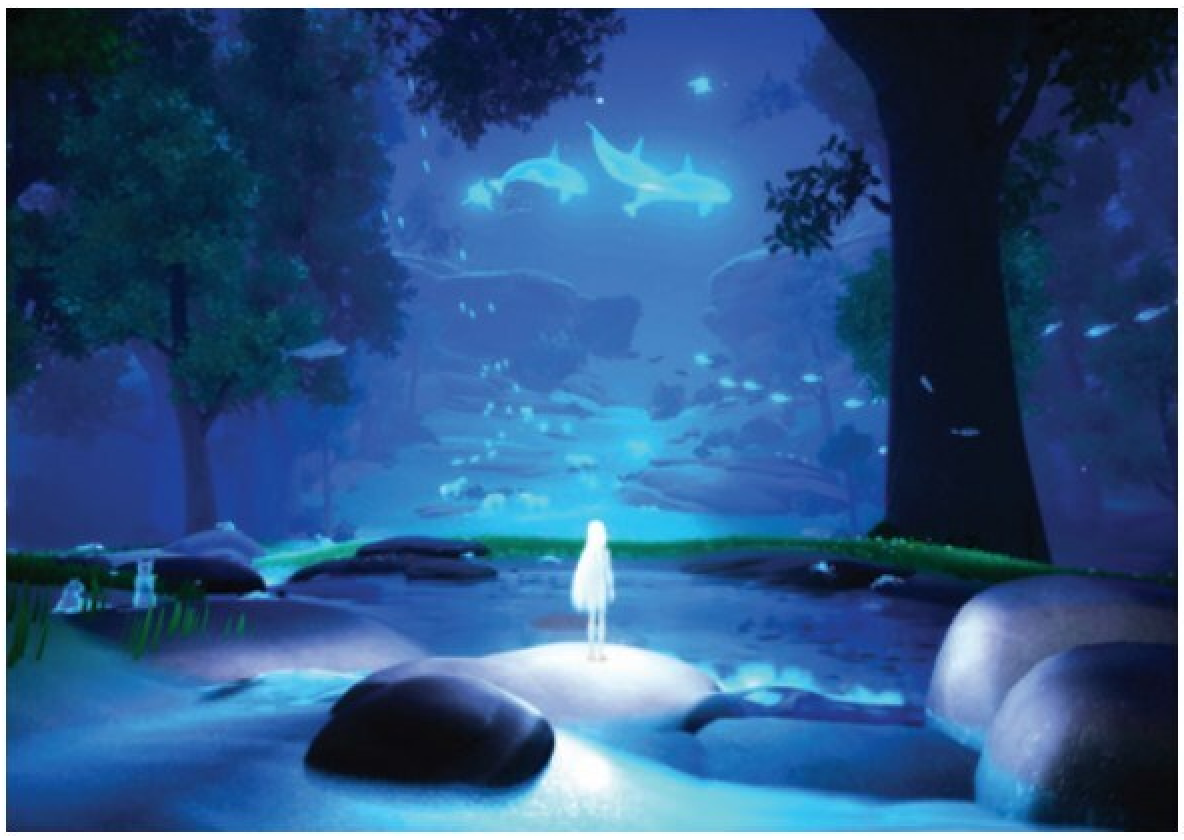
While it is a little buggy, another delightful surprise was Lego 2K Drive's couch co-op, which allows you and a partner to peel through the open world together, pooling XP as you go. I found myself getting in the way of bombs or smashing into targets for my partner to make sure one of us got the top spot. Notably, this feature made the dreary defend and rescue missions much more palatable thanks to the collaborative nature of the gameplay.

Unfortunately, the elephant in the room, or in this case, a monkey, is the game's storefront, Unkie's Emporium, introduced during the tutorial by its eponymous primate mechanic. Here, you can purchase premium currency with real money that can be exchanged to access cars and characters previously locked behind a costly Brickbux wall. Of course, you could earn all these items by grinding, but the temptation lingers, which is troubling for a game so clearly geared toward younger audiences.

Lego 2K Drive builds an incredibly inviting world where speed and silliness reign supreme as you race and morph across its delightfully destructible setting. Despite some frustrating mission design and a smattering of bugs, Lego 2K Drive quickly won me over with its absurd narrative full of irreverent dialogue and moreish open-world challenges. If only the specter of microtransactions didn't loom so large in this kid-friendly game, it would make for an even smoother ride. **BY SARAH THWAITES**

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Racing (6-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** 2K **DEVELOPER** Visual Concepts
RELEASE May 19 **RATING** E10+



AFTER US

Uncomfortable truths

As a development team, the members of Piccolo Studio have an apparent interest in uncomfortable realities. After Us has broader ambitions, telling an allegorical tale about life after humanity and the complicated and often-devastating relationship we have always had with nature. The conclusions it leaves to the player to draw on those subjects are thematically heavy-handed but still impactful. The traversal-focused adventure that gets you there features moments of brilliance and beauty but some frequent frustrations along the way.

Players control a nymphlike girl who embodies the spirit of Gaia, moving through a world long left in shambles by human mishandling. The core gameplay of jumping and fighting back the devouring human spirits along the way fails to hold up to the surrounding visual feast. Leaps and other traversal mechanics are often imprecise, leading to too many respawns because landings are so floaty and hard to detect. The infrequent and rudimentary battles lack even the most basic abilities to lock-on or move laterally, resulting in strange retreats to gain some distance before the occasional quick turn to fling out an attack. I was eager to push past those moments and get back to exploration.

After Us poses some well-tread but timely questions about our impact on the world and its living things. However, optional discoveries throughout the game suggest that Piccolo is trying to present a slightly more ambivalent take on the subject. Some of that is best left for the player to discover for themselves. I recommend After Us strongly as a piece of visual artistry. It's less successful as an interactive experience, but none of its problems are so glaring that it should dissuade someone from discovering its striking and haunting world. **BY MATT MILLER**

7.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Private Division
DEVELOPER Piccolo **RELEASE** May 23 **RATING** T

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: GOLLUM

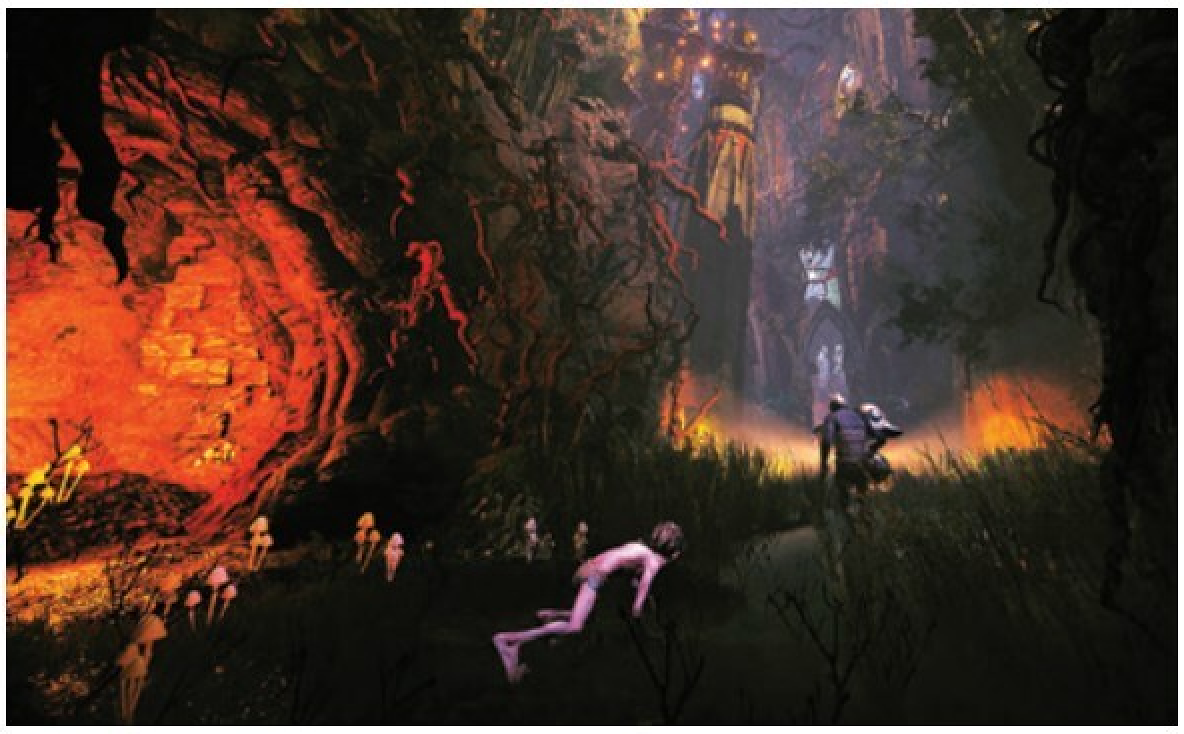
Flawed premise

At times, an event or character can be profoundly impactful to its originating fiction, but not the right choice for a dedicated spotlight project of its own. It's hard to think of a more potent case in point than The Lord of the Rings: Gollum, a game that fundamentally misunderstands the appeal of its source franchise, focusing on a character who, by almost any measure, is the wrong choice for a lead.

Gameplay is split chiefly between old-fashioned linear traversal sequences and clumsy, uninteresting stretches of stealth. In navigation of the stages, the jumping is imprecise, stages are poorly structured to communicate where you can go, and the camera is unwieldy, or sometimes even broken, flipping entirely upside down while climbing or refusing to rotate to view the next necessary jump. I died repeatedly and frequently to jumps that should have been easy or mistakenly guessed where the next platform could be reached. The only small blessing is frequent checkpoints to soften the blow of the endless repeats.

While terrible, I longed for those platforming sequences every time the game switched to one of its plentiful stealth sequences. Unlike any modern stealth game, Gollum has no interesting tricks or tools to enrich these passages.

I constantly struggled against the controls, camera, and objectives as they were presented. And nothing about the story or characters of The Lord of the Rings: Gollum offers reason to push past the frustration. As a longtime fan of Tolkien's fiction, it's possible that I liked the game even less for the way it seemed to misuse the source material. It's hard to have a more damning indictment than to say that this Gollum game isn't for fans of The Lord of the Rings, but here we are. **BY MATT MILLER** ■



3.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Daedalic Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Daedalic Entertainment
RELEASE May 25 **RATING** T

GAMES

GETTING INTO THE GAME

How Netflix Games built an impressive library in its first 18 months BY JASON FANELLI

If someone sees the term "video game publisher," a few names likely come to mind. Nintendo, Xbox, PlayStation, Activision, and Ubisoft routinely publish some of the biggest titles in the game industry. But it might surprise you to learn Netflix is trying to add its name to that list.

Open your Netflix app right now. Scroll past the big new releases, the recommended movies and TV shows, past the trending now section, and you'll finally see it: Netflix Games, offering "no ads, extra fees or in-app purchases" and "unlimited access to exclusive games," all included with the standard subscription. A few of these titles don't have mobile versions elsewhere, yet they sit on Netflix's mobile app. How did that happen?

Leanne Loombe, Netflix's VP of External Games, has a simple answer: creating, what she calls, the best environment possible for developers to make games.

Establishing the Relationship

Loombe is no stranger to the game industry, as her nearly two-decade-long resume includes names like Riot Games and Electronic Arts. That experience has fostered knowledge of what a team needs to thrive, and she's employing what she's learned at Netflix.

"I'm not sure whether it makes a difference whether they're indie or larger, like a Ubisoft, as it's really about what they are trying to accomplish both with their game and with their studio as a whole," she says. "We want to make sure we have shared values and shared goals: Are both sides in this partnership for the right reasons? Do we want to accomplish the same thing? Are we moving in the same direction? How are we going to work together to make this game a success, and how are we going to partner with these studios in the best way, so we can make the best game for our members?"

So far, at least the studios we talked with are pleased with how it's approaching each partnership. Snowman, whose game Lucky Luna hit the service in September 2022, has already signed on for another game, Laya's Horizon. Andrew Schimmel, a senior producer at the studio, particularly appreciates the team's hands-off approach.

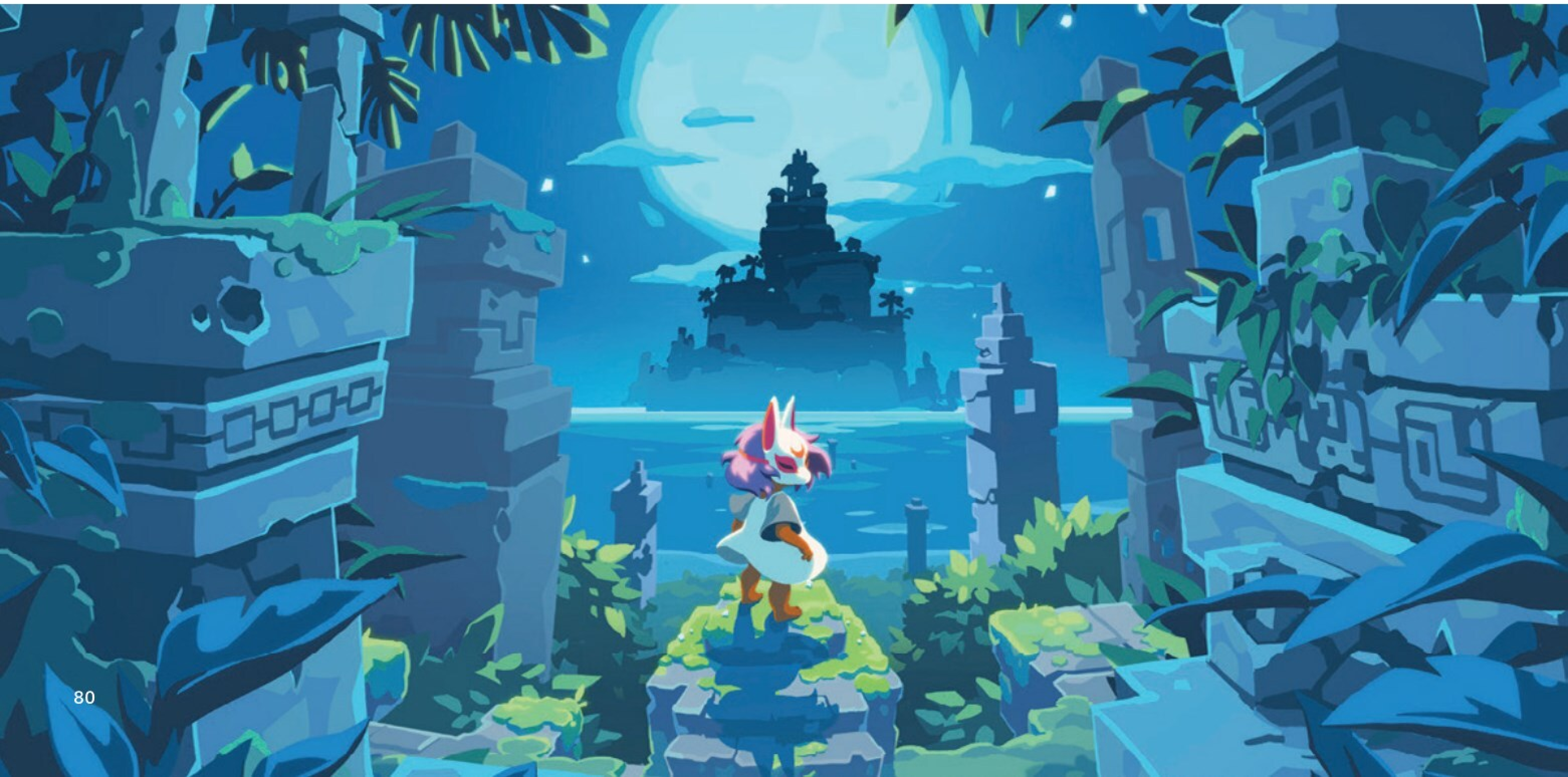
"They allowed us to work with autonomy and include what we felt was most important here at our studio," Schimmel says. "We always got really great, well-considered feedback on builds from them. I was surprised by the level of detail they included every time. I think it really proved to us how much they cared and how much effort they placed in understanding what we were making. It fostered a lot of mutual respect."

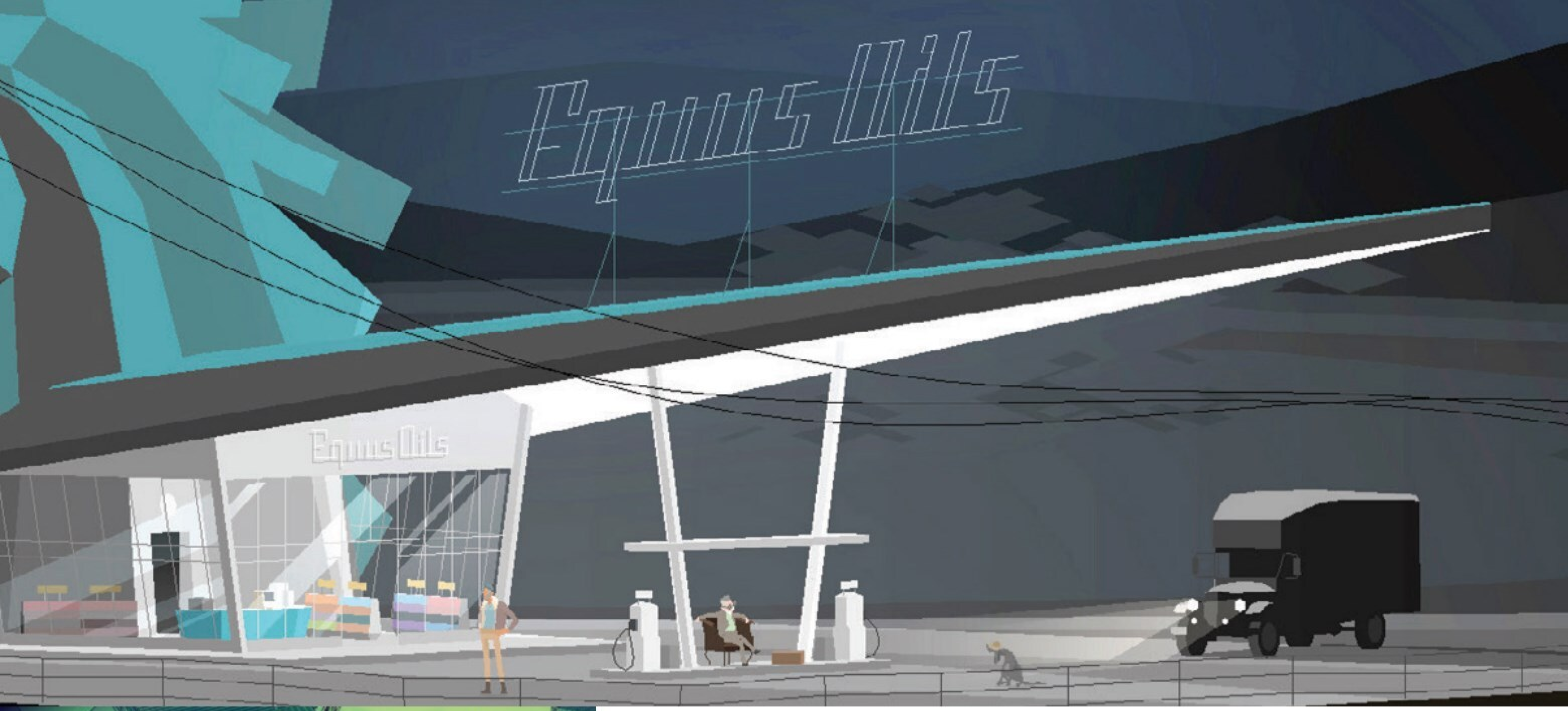
No Money? No Problem

The focus on a lack of monetization is one key example of Netflix's developer-friendly approach. "Not only is it great for our subscribers, it allows our developers freedom," Loombe says. "Monetization, to some degree, can provide constraints that might be challenging to work within, so when you remove those restrictions, our developers can then make the game they want to make."

This approach led another major publisher, Devolver Digital, to the service after the company's vice president of mobile, Mark Hickey, was introduced to the team through a mutual connection. Hickey says Devolver has always focused on premium and interesting indies, which can get lost

Lucky Luna
↖





in a sea of free-to-play, heavily monetized games on mobile app stores. “Since Netflix games have no ads or micro-transactions,” Hickey says, “the service has emerged as an exciting new channel for indie games, including the ones we work on.”

Jake Elliott, co-founder of Kentucky Route Zero developer Cardboard Computer, echoes that sentiment. “The wider mobile games marketplace – so steeped in exotic monetization schemes and viral marketing – is pretty off-putting to us in a lot of ways,” Elliott told us. “Netflix’s approach, subscription-based access to a curated library of interesting games, seems more supportive of the kind of work we want to make.”

Rogue Games – which has two games on the service as of this writing, Highwater and Dust & Neon – also benefits from the lack of monetization. As CEO Matt Casamassina puts it, “We won’t transform our games to work with F2P monetization schemes.” But the subscription model that Netflix provides “has been fantastic for us because more players get to experience Rogue Games, and many of them wouldn’t have played titles like Dust & Neon otherwise.”

233 Million Subscribers Can’t Be Wrong

Another major advantage of Netflix over other publishers is its built-in customer base: every existing subscriber can access every game it publishes in the mobile app.

This massive audience is immediately delivered to studios big and small – even if there’s no guarantee that every single subscriber is playing. Sometimes that number is too hard to pass up, even if the number of active subscribers has fallen in recent months.

Snowman is a prime example of a smaller dev getting instant massive exposure. “Anytime we see a new space like this open up, we see another opportunity for games to grow and for more players to connect with experiences that they might otherwise miss,” Schimmel says. “We’re excited to see this gateway open up to a much richer world of gaming.”

Cyrille Imbert, CEO of TMNT: Shredder’s Revenge publisher Dotemu, thinks the move is long overdue. “I’ve always wondered why Netflix was not doing the move to video games with a huge subscriber base,” Imbert says. “They are doing it now, and I think it has lots of potential, so we are happy to support it.”

↘
Top: Kentucky Route Zero
Center: Dust & Neon

Teenage Mutant
Ninja Turtles:
Shredder’s Revenge
↗

↓ Laya's Horizon

Right Under Your Nose

While Netflix's inclusion of its games portfolio into its normal subscription makes sense, what's less clear is how the company plans to feature those games in its mobile app. As mentioned before, finding the Netflix Games section of the main screen requires a decent amount of scrolling, and while specific tabs exist for new programming and downloads at the bottom of the screen, games get no such feature.

This lack of top billing might seem a deterrent, but those working with Netflix claim they're not really concerned. Matt Casamassina of Rogue Games attributes it to the service still being in its infancy compared to the rest of Netflix.

"The way I see it, though, is that while Netflix is a very mature service in the sense that it has revolutionized streaming movies and series, it's also very early on with its games offering," he says. "I don't know where they will be a year from now or even three, but based on the moves they're making, they're not just committed but playing to win."

Xavier Liard, co-founder of Playdigious, thinks the alternative – offering a standalone version of the game for a set price – might actually be worse for his company's games. "By publishing a paid game, we would limit the distribution only to gamers paying for the game," Liard says, "but by teaming up with Netflix, we can reach a larger audience since it is free to download for their millions of users."

Even Netflix itself recognizes the dilemma but is also of the opinion that Netflix Games is simply early in its lifecycle. The Netflix Games platform has yet to reach its second anniversary, and Loombe even goes so far as to call the lack of in-your-face visibility intentional.

"Our philosophy is simple: let's do things, learn from them, experiment, figure out what works and what doesn't, and then adapt based on those learnings," she says. "I personally really appreciate that approach, as it's honestly helped us move a bit quicker to get games out and figure out our roadmap."

Filling Out the Ranks

Loombe knows Netflix's customer base is a boon, but the team must also consider appealing to as many people as possible. After all, 233 million is a massive figure, and Loombe and her team know it.

"One of the things we're really passionate about is building that portfolio to reflect the variety and diversity of members that we have," Loombe says. "We're constantly looking for new, fresh, different games to bring to Netflix so that we can have that diverse portfolio for people to play."

That selection includes pre-existing games, games new to mobile, and brand-new games based on Netflix's movie and TV properties. Longtime mobile developer Super Evil Megacorp is the latest to sign on to make one of these Netflix IP games, and CEO Kristian Segerstrale considers the partnership a perfect fit.

"We pick partners for our projects that we think offer the best opportunity to bring something really special to life that plays to our strengths as game makers while simultaneously allowing us to stretch our capabilities and learn something new," Segerstrale says via email. "We chose to work with Netflix for this project because of the opportunity to work on a really exciting transmedia IP together, the ability to learn to work within a subscription environment, their reach and their team."

Making the Call

When it comes to initiating talks, who approaches who? Does Netflix seek out developers of games it's interested in publishing to mobile, or do the developers visit Netflix and try to talk their way in? Loombe says it's both, but Netflix has still devised a measured plan for choosing games to bring in.

"We have a very phased approach that we're working toward, with an idea of the shape of the portfolio we're trying to build," Loombe says. "It's really based on what we've learned from the games we've launched over the last 18 months. Every time we get information from our members about a game we've launched, we then adapt the shape of the portfolio to that feedback."

One of the companies that reached out to Netflix was Exploding Kittens – the wildly popular card-based tabletop game. The team was already working with Netflix on an upcoming TV show, and when it heard about Netflix's gaming publishing wing, it was intrigued.

"We initially opened discussions with Netflix on an informal level to learn more about their developing service," Exploding Kittens lead game designer Evan Losi says. "Exploding Kittens is easy to pick up and play, and it appeals to a wide range of players. An approachable game like ours is perfect for this sort of service."

DEFUSE THE
EXPLODING KITTEN
ADAM
LYDIA
15%
EXPLODING KITTEN
13 CARDS LEFT
KITTEN BANJO
START TURN
IT'S YOUR TURN!
YOU
CATNIP SANDWICH
CATTERMELON
BUNNYRAPTOR

↘ Exploding Kittens

Netflix (Games) and Chill

The team at Netflix Games is showing no signs of slowing down, as the company recently announced it would add 40 new games to the service in 2023, including at least one game each month. Plans are in place for another 30 games with various partners, while 16 games are in production across the company's various internal studios.

Netflix is not the first company to try its hand at a service like this – Apple, Google, and Amazon also spring to mind, each with varying degrees of success – and according to Loombe, the team understands building this sort of service takes time.

"We are pretty proud about what we've accomplished so far," Loombe says. "Based on the plans and the strategy that we have, I'm feeling confident, and I know the team is too. We're super excited about what the future holds for Netflix Games, especially based on some of the things we've got in the pipeline."

The subscribers are there. The games are there. Now all Netflix has to do is introduce them to each other. ■

↘ Highwater

MISSING IN ACTION

THERE'S BEEN NO SHORTAGE of big reveals in recent days, which paint a picture of the gaming landscape for the next year or more. But even with all the excitement, there were still several projects that remained quiet during the big summer events. Here are some of the titles we didn't see but can't wait to learn more about. **BY MATT MILLER**

- Ark 2 *(Studio Wildcard)*
- BioShock 4 *(Cloud Chamber)*
- Crimson Desert *(Pearl Abyss)*
- Death Stranding 2 *(Kojima Productions)*
- DokeV *(Pearl Abyss)*
- Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes *(Rabbit and Bear Studios)*
- The Elder Scrolls VI *(Bethesda Game Studios)*
- Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas VR *(Rockstar Games)*
- Hades 2 *(Supergiant Games)*
- Judas *(Ghost Story Games)*
- Lost Soul Aside *(Ultizero Games)*
- Metal Slug Tactics *(Leikir Studio)*
- Metroid Prime 4 *(Retro Studios)*
- Slitterhead *(Bokeh Game Studio)*
- S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Heart of Chornobyl *(GSC Game World)*
- Star Citizen *(Roberts Space Industries)*
- Star Wars Eclipse *(Quantic Dream)*
- Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic Remake *(TBA)*
- Stellar Blade *(Shift Up Corporation)*
- Transformers: Reactivate *(Splash Damage)*
- Wolverine *(Insomniac)*
- Wonder Woman *(Monolith Productions)* ■

Star Wars Eclipse

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